THE MAGAZINE OF

Fantasy AND Science Fiction

A MERCURY PUBLICATION

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THE MANOR OF ROSES
by Thomas Burnett Swann

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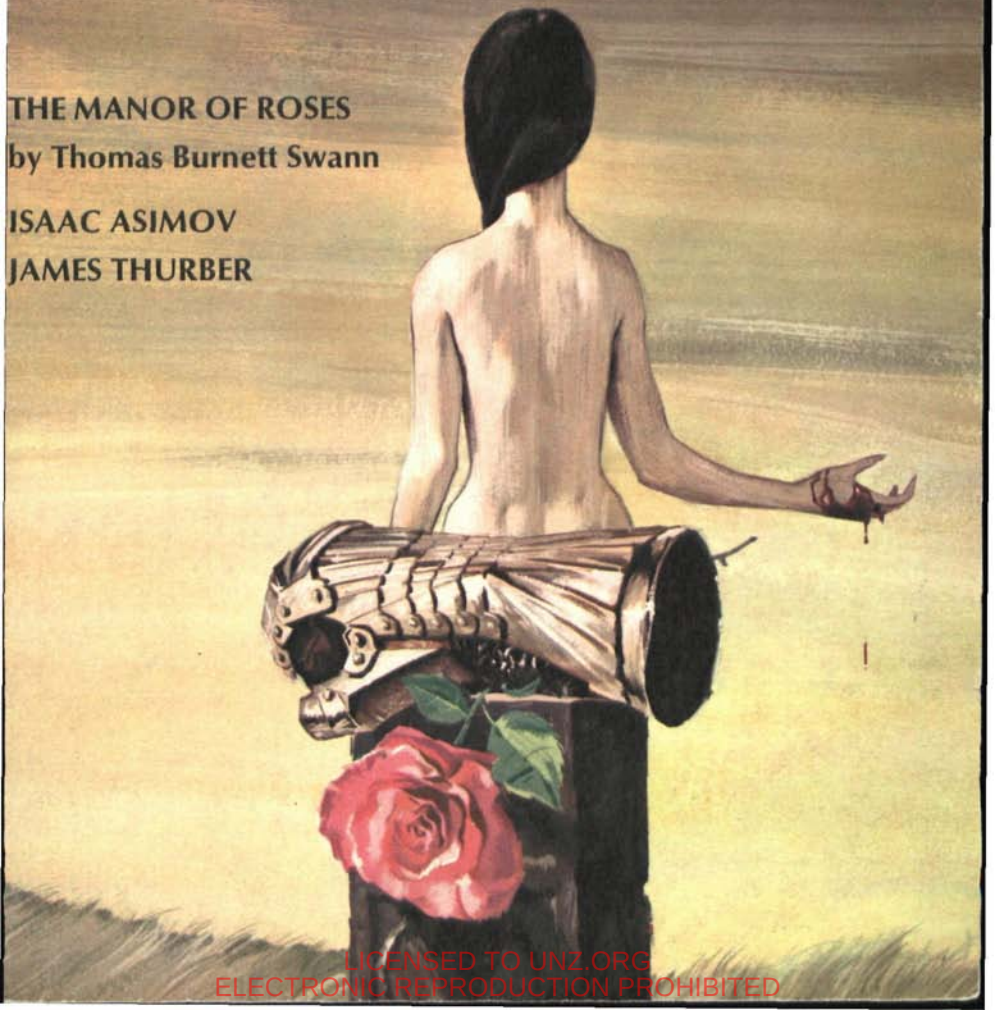

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Fantasy and Science Fiction

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction, Volume 31, No. 5, Whole No. 186, Nov. 1966. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc., at 50¢ a copy. Annual subscription $5.00; $5.50 in Canada and the Pan American Union, $6.00 in all other countries. Publication office, 10 Ferry Street, Concord, N. H. 03302. Editorial and general mail should be sent to 347 East 53rd St., New York, N. Y. 10022. Second Class postage paid at Concord, N. H. Printed in U.S.A.

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Thomas Burnett Swann is an English professor with a penchant for travel, research and writing. When last heard from, he was teaching at Wesleyan College in Georgia and finishing a biography of Winnie the Pooh's A. A. Milne. Dr. Swann has authored other biographies as well as several books of poetry, the most recent being a collection of short, whimsical verse called ALAS, IN LILLIPUT *("Alas, in Lilliput/The Least begin to grow: A pumpkin from a betel nut, A buzzard from a crow!"). Most of Dr. Swann's science fiction and fantasy has been published in England and is perhaps not as familiar as deserved to American readers—a situation which we are delighted to improve by offering this superior and enchanting tale.*

THE MANOR OF ROSES

by Thomas Burnett Swann

CHAPTER I

I AM THIRTY-FIVE, A WOMAN OF middle years, and yet in this time of pox and plague, of early death and the dying of beauty before the body dies, it is said that I am still as beautiful as a Byzantine Madonna, poised in the heaven of a gold mosaic and wearing sorrow like a robe of white petals. But sorrow is not a gown. It is a nakedness to the searching eye of the curious, to the magpie-tongued who love to pry out grief: She grieves too long . . . The Manor demands an heir . . . Who will defend us from the encroaching forest, the thieves and the Mandrake People?

It was eleven years ago, in the year 1202 of Our Lord, that my husband's comrade-in-arms, Edmund-the-Wolf, rode to me with the news of my husband's death and, as if for compensation, the riches captured before he had died in battle. Captured? Pillaged, I should say, in the sack of Constantinople. You see, it is a time when men are boys, rapacious and cruel, as ready to kill a Jew, a Hungarian, a Greek as an Infidel; happy so long as they wield a

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sword and claim to serve God. A time when boys who have not yet grown to their fathers' pride—Crusading, it is called—are the only true men.

And yet I loved my husband, a red-haired Norman, gay as the men of the South, and not like most of our stern northern people. I loved him for his gaiety, his hair the color of Roman bricks, and because he left me a son.

But the Crusader's code, like an evil demon of pox, also possesses children. Only last year in France and Germany, Stephen proclaimed his message from Christ, Nicholas piped his irresistible flute, and the children yearned to them as tides to the moon and flowed in a sea of white immaculate robes toward the shores of that greater sea, the Mediterranean.

Little of the madness crossed to England. Perhaps our children are not inclined to visions, perhaps they prefer the hunt to the drafty halls of a church and talks with God. But the madness, missing the thousands, somehow touched my son. He rode to London, astride his roan palfrey and dressed in a jerkin of sheepskin dyed to the yellow of gorse, with a leather belt at his waist and a fawn-colored pouch a-jingle with new-minted pennies. Ready to board a ship for Marseilles and join Stephen! But Stephen and most of his army were sold as slaves to the Infidel; Nicholas died of the plague before he reached the sea; and my son of fifteen summers, reaching London, stood on the banks of the Thames to choose what twin-castled ship would bear him across the channel, and fell to the blade of a common cutpurse. The Devil, I think, possessed the children, a jest to fling like a gauntlet in the teeth of God.

God is not blind, however. In less than a year, he sent me those other children, struck with the same madness: John, a dark-haired Norman; Stephen, a Saxon but named like the boy of France; and Ruth, whom they called their guardian angel (but no one knew if she came from Heaven or Hell). God, I felt, had made me His instrument to preserve them from my own son's ruin. Was He wrong to trust me with so precious and difficult a task? I tried, Mother of God I tried! I sheltered them from the Mandrakes of the forest. Loved them, hurt them, and then at the last—But you shall judge me. . . .

He ran blinded by tears across the heath, startling birds into flight, pheasants and grouse enough to feast a king. Conies peered from their nests and submerged like frogs in a pond with a dull, simultaneous plop. Didn't they know that he, timorous John, who had lost his bow in the woods and scattered the arrows out of his quiver, was not a creature to fear?

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He had come from the hunt with his father, lord of Goshawk Castle, and the knights Robert, Arthur, Edgar, and the rest. The names of the knights were different, their features almost identical. Rough hands, calloused from wielding swords against the Infidel—and their fellow Englishmen. Cheeks ruddy with mead and not with the English climate. Odorous bodies enveloped by fur-lined surcoats which they pridefully wore even in the flush of summer, instead of imitating the villeins with their simple breechclouts or their trousers without tunics. Lank, sweat-dampened hair, long in the back and cut in a fringe across their foreheads.

John, the Baron's son, had been allowed the first shot at a stag beleaguered by hounds. He was not a good bowman, but the stag had been much too close to miss except by design. He had missed by design. Once, gathering chestnuts with his friend Stephen, the shepherd, he had seen the same animal, a splendid beast with horns like wind-beaten trees along the North Sea.

"He isn't afraid of us," Stephen had whispered.

"Nor has he reason to be," said John. "We would never harm him. He's much too beautiful."

Now, the animal had turned and looked at him with recognition, it seemed, and resignation; harried by hounds; bemused in a clump of bracken. John had fired his arrow above the antlers. The stag had escaped, bursting out of the bracken as if the coarse ferns were blades of grass and leveling three dogs with his adamantine hooves.

"Girl!" his father had shouted, hoarse with rage at losing a feast and a pair of antlers to grace his barren hall. "I should get you a distaff instead of a bow!"

For punishment John was bladed. After the knights had downed a smaller animal, a young doe, they had stretched him across the warm, bloody carcass and each man had struck him with the flat of his sword. Most of the knights had softened their blows. After all, he was their liege-lord's son. But his father's blow had left him bleeding and biting his tongue to hold back shameful tears.

Then they had left him.

"Go to the kennels and get your friend Stephen to dry your tears," his father had sneered. A coarse guffaw greeted the taunt. Stephen was said to have lain with every villein's daughter between twelve and twenty, and men without daughters liked to jest: "Girls weep till Stephen dries their tears."

Alone in the woods, John forgot his shame; he was too frightened. Just turned twelve, he knew of desperate thieves, sentenced to die by the rope, who had taken refuge among the sycamores which remembered the Romans, and the

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oaks which had drunk the blood of Druid sacrifices. As for animals, there were wolves and bears and long-tusked boars, and amphisbaenas too, the twin-headed serpents, and griffins with scaly wings. Worst of all, there were the Mandrake People who, grown like roots, clambered out of the ground to join their kin in acts of cannibalism.

Where could he go? Not to the castle, certainly, where the hunters had doubtless climbed in a broad wooden tub to scrape the grime of weeks from each other's backs, while kitchen wenches doused them with buckets of steaming water and ogled their naked brawn. Once, the castle had held his mother. Its darkness had shone with the whiteness of her samite; its odors were masked with the cloves and the cinnamon, the mace and the musk of her kitchen; its bailey had bloomed with a damson tree whose seeds had come from the Holy Land, and delicate shallots, the "Onions of Ascalon," had reared their tender shoots around the tree, like little guardian gnomes.

"If there must be fruits of war," she had said, "we must see that they are living things, not dead, sweet things, not bitter, soft things, not hard. The verdure of earth and not the gold from dead men's coffers."

Six years ago she had died of the pox. Now, when he knelt on the stone floor of the chapel, he prayed to Father, Son, and Mary, but Mary was Mother.

No, he could not go to the castle. He could but he did not wish to visit the Abbot's cottage and face another lesson in logic and astrology, Lucan and Aristotle. He was a willing, indeed a brilliant scholar. But there were times to study and times to look for Stephen. In spite of his father's taunt, it was time to look for Stephen. It was not that his friend was soft or womanish like a sister. He was, in fact, as rough-swearing, ready-to-fight a boy as ever tumbled a girl in the hay. But he curbed his roughness with John, respected his learning, and ignored his weaknesses.

Stephen was a Saxon villein three years older than John. His forebears, he rightly claimed, had once been powerful earls. But the conquering Normans had reduced them to the status of serfs and attached them to their own former lands, which had once held a wooden hall surrounded by a palisade, but now a castle built by John's grandfather, a square stone keep encircled by curtain walls whose gatehouse was toothed with a rusty portcullis and guarded by archers in hidden embrasures. Stephen's parents were dead, killed by the Mandrake People in one of their swift forays out of the forest to steal sheep and hogs. It was on that very day, two years ago, that

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he and Stephen had become inseparable friends. John had found him crouching above his mother's body. John, who did not even know his name, had laid a tentative arm around his shoulders—an act of extraordinary boldness for one so shy—and half expected a snarled rebuff or even a blow. But Stephen had buried his head in the arms of his master's son and sobbed convulsively without tears. It was not long before they agreed to adopt each other as brothers and, cutting their forearms with a hunting knife, mingled their blood to cement the bond.

From that time till now, Stephen had lived in a loft above the kennels, dog-boy, shepherd, farmer, fighter with fists and cudgel second to none. He could not read English, much less French and Latin, but the wolves feared his cudgel and grown men his fists. How could you best describe him? Angry, sometimes, but angry *for* things and not against them. For the serfs and the squalor in which they lived; the dogs which were run too hard in the hunt and gored by wild boars; the animals killed for sport and not for food. Sometimes, too, he was glad: loudly, radiantly, exuberantly keen on things—drawing a bow, feeding his dogs, swinging a scythe.

At other times he was neither angry nor glad, but beyond anger and gladness; enraptured by dreams: of meeting an angel or finding Excalibur or, best of all, buying his freedom and becoming a Knight Hospitaler to succor pilgrims and slaughter Infidels ("But you would have to take an oath of chastity," John reminded him. "I'll think about that when the time comes," said Stephen). Furthermore, he was one of those rarest of rarities, a dreamer who acts on his dreams, and lately he had talked about the ill-fated Children's Crusade, and how it was time for other Stephens, other Nicholases, to follow the first children and, armed with swords instead of crosses, succeed where they had failed.

It was John's unspeakable fear that Stephen would leave for Jerusalem without him, and yet he did not know if he had the courage for such a journey, through the dark Weald to London and then by ship to Marseilles and the ports of Outre-Mer, the Outer Land, the Saracen Land. Now, he quickened his pace and thought of arguments with which to dissuade his friend. He met old Edward scything in the Common Meadow; a tattered breechclout around his loins, his face and shoulders as coarse and brown as a saddle ridden from London to Edinburgh. Edward did not look up from his task, nor miss a stroke of the scythe. "Why look at the sky?" he liked to mutter. "It belongs to angels, not to serfs."

"Have you seen Stephen?" John asked.

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Swish, swish, swish went the scythe, and the weeds collapsed as if they had caught the plague.

"HAVE YOU SEEN STEPHEN?"

"I'm not deaf," the old man growled. "Your father's taken my youth, my pigs, and my corn, but not my ears. Not yet, anyway. Your friend'll be losing his, though, 'less he does his work. He oughta be here in the Meadow right now."

"But where *is* he?" cried John in desperation.

"Making for the Roman Place with that look in his eyes. That's where he hides, you know. Daydreams. Didn't even speak to me."

The Roman Place. The ruin where the Romans had worshipped their sun-god, Mithras, in an underground vault. Later, by way of apology to the Christian God, the Saxons had built a timber church to conceal the spot and turned the vault into a crypt for their dead. During the Norman Conquest, women and children had hidden in the church, and the Normans had set a torch to the roof and burned the building with all of its occupants. The charred and misshapen remnants were almost concealed—healed, as it were—by flowering gorse, and a few blackened timbers, which thrust like seeking hands from the yellow flowers, summoned no worshippers to the buried gods.

A stranger would not suspect a vault beneath the gorse, but John parted the spiny branches and climbed through a narrow hole to a flight of stairs. A sacredness clung to the place, a sense of time, like that of a Druid stone which lichen had aged to a muted, mottled orange and which thrust at the stars as if to commune with them in cosmic loneliness. Here, the worshippers of Mithras had bathed themselves in the blood of the sacrificial bull and climbed through the seven stages of initiation to commune with the sun instead of the stars. A nasty pagan rite, said the Abbot, and John had asked him why Jehovah had ordered Abraham to sacrifice Isaac. "It was only a test," snapped the Abbot.

"But what about Jephthah's daughter? *She* wasn't a test." The Abbot had changed the subject.

Already, at twelve, John had begun to ask questions about the Bible, God, Christ, and the Holy Ghost. To Stephen, religion was feeling and not thought. God was a patriarch with a flowing beard, and angels were almost as real as the dogs in his kennel. With John it was different. Only the Virgin Mary was not a subject for doubts, arguments, but a beautiful, ageless woman robed in samite, dwelling in the high places of the air or almost at hand, outshining the sun and yet as simple as bread, grass, birds, and Stephen's love; invisible but never unreachable.

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At the foot of the stairs he faced a long, narrow cave with earthen walls which contained the loculi of Christians buried in their cerements and which converged to the semi-circle of an apse. Now, the apse was empty of Mithras slaying the sacred bull and Mary holding the infant Christ. Stephen knelt in their place. He held a waxen candle which lit the frescoed roof: Jesus walking on water; multiplying loaves and fish; bidding the blind to see and the lame to walk.

"John," he gasped, "I have found—"

"A Madonna!"

She lay in a nest of bindweed shaped to a simple pallet. Her face was an ivory mask in the light of the candle. A carved Madonna, thought John, from the transept of a French cathedral, but flushed with the unmistakable ardors of life. No, he saw with a disappointment which approached dismay, she was much too young for the Virgin; a mere girl.

"An angel," said Stephen.

"An angel," sighed John, resenting her youthfulness. What did he need with a second angel, a girl at that? God (or the Virgin Mary) had sent him Stephen, angelic but not female and certainly not effeminate, his hair a riot instead of an aureole, his face more ruddy than pink: a Michael or Gabriel fit for sounding a trumpet instead of strumming a lyre.

The angel stirred and opened her eyes with a pretty fluttering; not with surprise or fright, but almost, thought John, with artful calculation, like some of the rustic lasses who flocked to Stephen's loft. Her teeth were as white as her linen robe, which was bound at the waist by a cord of cerulean silk. Her pointed slippers, unicorn leather trimmed with blue velvet, were such as might be worn in the soft pastures of heaven. She lacked only wings. Or had she concealed them under her robe? John was tempted to ask.

Stephen forestalled him. "Greet her," he whispered. "Welcome her!"

"In what language?" asked John sensibly. "I don't know the tongues of angels."

"Latin, I should think. She must know that, with all the priests muttering their Benedicites."

Stephen had a point. Rude English was out of the question, and also the French of the Normans, who, after all, had descended from barbarous Vikings.

"Quo Vadis?" asked John none too politely.

Her smile, though delectable, no doubt, to Stephen, did not answer the question.

"What are you doing here?" he repeated in Norman French.

Stephen, who understood some French, frantically nudged him. "You shouldn't question an angel. Welcome her! Worship her! Quote her a psalm or a proverb."

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"We aren't sure she's an angel. She hasn't told us, has she?"

At last she spoke. "I do not know how I came here," she said in flawless Latin and, seeing the blankness on Stephen's face, repeated the words in English, but with a grave dignity which softened the rough tongue. At the same time, John noticed the crucifix which she held or rather clutched in her hands: a small Greek cross with arms of equal length, wrought of gold and encrusted with stones which he knew from his studies, though not from his father's castle, were the fabulous pearls of the East. "I remember only a darkness, and a falling, and a great forest. I wandered until I found the passage to this cave, and took shelter against the night. I must have been very tired. I feel as if I have slept for a long time." She lifted the cross and then, as if its weight had exhausted her slender hands, allowed it to sink becomingly against her breast.

"I suppose," said John with annoyance, "you're hungry."

Stephen sprang to his feet. "But angels don't eat! Can't you see, John? God has sent her to us as a sign! To lead us to the Holy Land! Stephen of France had his message from Christ. We have our angel."

"But look what happened to Stephen of France. Sold as a slave or drowned in the sea. Only the sharks know which."

"I don't think he's dead. And if he is, then he listened to the Devil's voice and not to God's. But we can *see* our angel."

"Indeed, you can see me," she said, "and you ought to see that I am famished. Angels do eat, I assure you—at least when they travel—and something more substantial than nectar and dew. Have you venison perhaps? Mead?"

"You must take her to the castle," said Stephen, clearly reluctant to part with his new-found angel. "I've nothing so fine in the kennels."

"No," said John. "I'm not taking anyone to the castle. I've decided to stay with you in the kennels."

"Because of your father?"

"Yes. He bladed me before all of his men, and then he called me a —" He could not bring himself to repeat the taunt, especially to Stephen. "He called me a churl. Because I missed a stag. *Our* stag. The one we promised never to harm."

Stephen nodded with understanding. "I'm glad you missed him. They say he's the oldest stag in the forest. They say"—and here he lowered his voice—"that he isn't a stag at all, but Merlin turned to a beast by Vivian. But John, how can you live with me in the kennels? It would wound your father's pride. A baron's son sharing a loft with a dog-boy! He'd give you more than a blading, and as for me! You mayn't remember

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he cut off my father's ears because he broke a scythe. And now with an angel on our hands, the only thing to do is—"

"Get the angel off our hands?"

"Leave at once for the Holy Land. I have a little food in the kennels, a change of wear. You needn't go back to the castle at all. We've only to follow the Roman road through the Weald to London, and take ship to Marseilles, and from thence proceed to Outre-Mer."

"But Marseilles was where the French Stephen fell in the hands of slavers."

"But we have a guide!"

"If she isn't really an angel—"

"At least we'll have made our escape from the castle."

"You mean we should leave the castle *forever?*" The prospect of leaving his father exhilarated him; he would feel like a falcon with its hood removed. But the castle held all of his possessions, his codex, *The Kings of Britain,* written on the finest vellum and bound between ivory covers; and the parchment containing his favorite poem, "The Owl and the Nightingale," copied laboriously by his own precise hand. Much more important, it held his mother's ghost, his sum of remembering: stairs she had climbed, tapestries woven, garments mended; his mother living in song what she could not live in life and singing of noble warriors and deathless loves:

See, he who carved this wood
commands me to ask
You to remember, oh treasure-
adorned one,
The pledge of old . . .

"Leave my father's castle," he repeated, "and not come back? Ever?"

Stephen's face turned as red as the Oriflamme, the fiery banner of the French kings. *"Your father's castle?* This land belonged to my ancestors when yours were scurvy Vikings! You think I'll stay here forever as dog-boy and shepherd? Serving a man who blades his own son? Giving him what I grow and what I hunt, and asking his leave to take a wife? John, John, there's nothing for either of us here. Ahead of us lies Jerusalem!"

To Stephen, the name was a trumpet blast; to John, a death knell. "But a forest stands in the way, and then a channel, and a rough sea swarming with Infidels. They have ships too, you know, swifter than ours and armed with Greek Fire."

But Stephen had gripped his shoulders and fixed him with his blue, relentless gaze. "You know I can't leave you."

"You know you won't have to," sighed John.

The angel interrupted them, looking a little peeved that in their exchange of pleas and protestations, of male endearments, they were neglecting their quest and

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their inspiration. "As for leading you to the Holy Land, I don't even know this forest through which you say we must pass. But here in the ground it is damp, and before I came here, I did not like the look of the castle. It seemed to me dark and fierce, with a dry ditch and a gloomy keep, and narrow windows without a pane of glass. A fortress and not a home. If indeed I am an angel, I hope to find dwellings more pleasant here on earth. Or else I shall quickly return to the sky. In the meantime, let us set off for London, and you shall lead *me* until I begin to remember."

The angel between them, they climbed the stairs to the sun and, skirting old Edward, who was still busily scything in the Common Meadow, came at last to the kennels. It was mid-day. The Baron and his knights had remained in the castle since the hunt. His villeins, trudging out of the fields, had gathered in the shade of the water-mill to enjoy their gruel and bread. Had anyone noticed the quick, furtive passage of the would-be Crusaders, he would have thought them engaged in childish sports, or supposed that Stephen had found a young wench to share with his master's son and probably muttered, "It's high time."

While Stephen's greyhounds lapped at their heels, they climbed to his loft above the kennels to get his few belongings: two clover-green tunics with hoods for wintry days; wooden clogs and a pair of blue stockings which reached to the calf of the leg; a leather pouch bulging with wheaten bread and rounds of cheese; a flask of beer; and a knotted shepherd's crook.

"For wolves," said Stephen, pointing to the crook. "I've used it often."

"And Mandrakes," added John wickedly, hoping to frighten the angel.

"But we have no change of clothes for a girl," said Stephen.

"Never mind," she smiled, guzzling Stephen's beer and munching his bread till she threatened to exhaust the supply before they began their journey. "When my robe grows soiled, I shall wash it in a stream and," she added archly, "the two of you may see if I am truly an angel."

The remark struck John as unangelic if not indelicate. As if they would spy on her while she bathed!

But Stephen reassured her. "We never doubted you were. And now —" A catch entered his voice. Quickly he turned his head and seemed to be setting the loft in order.

"We must leave him alone with his hounds," whispered John to the angel, leading her down the ladder.

A silent Stephen rejoined them in the Heath. His tunic was damp from friendly tongues and his face

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was wet, but whether from tongues or tears, it was hard to say.

"You don't suppose," he said, "we could take one or two of them with us? The little greyhound without any tail?"

"No," said John. "My father will stomp and shout when he finds us gone, but then he'll shrug: 'Worthless boys, both of them, and no loss to the castle.' But steal one of his hounds, and he'll have his knights on our trail."

"But our angel has no name," cried Stephen suddenly and angrily, as if to say: "As long as she's come to take me from my hounds, she might at least have brought a name."

"I *had* a name, I'm sure. It seems to have slipped my mind. What would you like to call me?"

"Why not Ruth?" said Stephen. "She was always going on journeys in the Bible, leading cousins and such, wasn't she?"

"A mother-in-law," corrected John, who felt that, what with a Crusade ahead of them, Stephen should know the Scriptures.

"Leading and *being* led," observed the angel, whose memory, it seemed, had begun to return. "By two strapping husbands. Though," she hurried to explain, "not at the same time. Yes, I think you should call me Ruth."

She is much too young for Ruth, thought John, who guessed her to be about fifteen (though of course as an angel she might be fifteen thousand). The same age as Stephen, whose thoughts were attuned to angelic visions but whose bodily urges were not in the least celestial. Unlike a Knight Templar, he had made no vow of chastity. The situation was not propitious for a crusade in the name of God.

But once they had entered the Weald, the largest forest in southern England, he thought of Mandrakes and griffins instead of Ruth. It was true that the Stane, an old Roman highway, crossed the Weald to join London and Chichester—they would meet it within the hour—but even the Stane was not immune to the forest.

CHAPTER II

At Ruth's suggestion, they carefully skirted the grounds of a neighboring castle, the Boar's Lair.

"Someone might recognize John," she said. "Send word to his father."

"Yes," John agreed, staring at the Norman tower, one of the black wooden keeps built by William the Conqueror to enforce his conquest. "My father and Philip the Boar were once friends. Philip used to dine with us on Michaelmas and other feast days, and I played the kettledrums for him. Since then, he and my father have fallen out about their boundaries. They both claim a certain grove of

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beechnut trees—pannage for their swine. Philip wouldn't be hospitable, I'm sure."

Deviously, circuitously, by way of a placid stream and an old water wheel whose power no longer turned mill-stones and ground wheat into flour, they reached the Roman Stane. Once a proud thoroughfare for unconquerable legions, it had since resounded to Saxon, Viking, and Norman, who had used it for commerce and war but, unlike the conscientious Romans, never repaired the ravages of wheels and weather. Now, it had shrunk in places to the width of a peasant's cart, but the smooth Roman blocks, set in concrete, still provided a path for riders and walkers and great ladies in litters between two horses.

"I feel like the Stane," sighed Ruth, "much-trodden and a trifle weedy." She had torn the edge of her robe on prickly sedges and muddied the white linen. She had lost the circlet which haloed her head, and her silken tresses, gold as the throats of convolvulus flowers, had spilled like their trailing leafage over her shoulders. As for John, he was hot, breathless, and moist with sweat, and wishing that like a serf he dared to remove his long-sleeved tunic and revel in his breechclout.

"Stephen," Ruth sighed, "now that we've found the road, can't we rest a little?" Her speech, though still melodious, had relaxed into easy, informal English.

"We've just begun!" he laughed. "London lies days away. We want to be leagues down the road before night."

"But it's already mid-afternoon. Why not rest till it gets a little cooler?"

"Very well," he smiled, reaching out to touch her in good-humored acquiescence. Stephen, who found difficulty with words, spoke with his hands, which were nests to warm a bird, balms to heal a dog, bows to extract the music from swinging a scythe, wielding an ax, gathering branches to build a fire. He could gesture or point or touch with the exquisite eloquence of a man who was deaf, dumb, and blind. When you said good morning to him, he clapped you on the shoulder. When you walked with him, he brushed against you or caught you by the arm. He liked to climb trees for the rough feel of the bark or swim in a winter stream and slap the icy currents until he warmed his body. But he saved his touch for the things or the people he loved. Neither ugly things nor unkind people.

"We'll rest as long as you like," he said.

Ruth smiled. "I think I should borrow one of your tunics. You see how my robe keeps dragging the ground."

With a flutter of modesty she withdrew to a clump of bracken and changed to a tunic.

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"Watch out for basilisks," John called after her. "Their bite is fatal, you know." He muttered under his breath to Stephen: "First she ate your food, and now she wears your clothes."

"*Our* food and clothes," reproved Stephen. "Remember, we're Crusaders together."

John was shamed into silence. He had to listen to Ruth as she bent branches, snapped twigs, and rustled cloth, almost as if she wished to advertise the various stages of her change. He thought of the wenches—ten? twenty?—who had disrobed for Stephen. The subject of sexual love confused him. The Aristotelian processes of his brain refused to sift, clarify, and evaluate the problem; in fact, they crumpled like windmills caught in a forest fire. He had loved his mother—what was the word?—filially; Stephen he loved fraternally. But as for the other thing, well, he had not been able to reconcile the courtly code as sung by the troubadours—roses and guerdons and troths of deathless fidelity—and the sight of Stephen, surprised last year in his loft with a naked wench and not in the least embarrassed. Stephen had grinned and said: "In a year or so, John, we can wench together!" The girl, snickering and making no effort to hide her nakedness, had seemed to him one of those Biblical harlots who ought to be shorn, or stoned. Who could blame poor Stephen for yielding to such allurements! As for himself, however, he had sworn the chivalric oath to practice poverty, chastity, and obedience to God. He had thought of a monastery but rather than part with Stephen, who was not in the least monastic, he was willing to try a life of action.

"Has a crow got your tongue?" smiled Stephen. "I didn't mean to scold." He encircled John's shoulder with his arm. "You smell like cloves."

John stiffened, not at the touch but at what appeared to be an insinuation. He had not forgotten his father's taunt: "Girl!" According to custom, it was girls and women who packed their gowns in clove-scented chests, while the men of a castle hung their robes in the room called the *garderobe,* another name for the lavatory cut in the wall beside the stairs, with a round shaft dropping to the moat. The stench of the shaft protected the room—and the robes—from moths.

"They belonged to my mother," he stammered. "The cloves, I mean. I still use her chest."

"My mother put flowering mint with her clothes," said Stephen. "All two gowns! I like the cloves better, though. Maybe the scent will rub off on me. I haven't bathed for a week." He gave John's shoulder a squeeze, and John knew that his manhood had not been belittled. But then, Stephen had never

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belittled him, had he? Teased him, yes; hurt him in play; once knocked him down for stepping on the tail of a dog; but never made light of his manliness.

"It's not a dangerous road," Stephen continued, talkative for once, perhaps because John was silent. "The abbots of Chichester patrol it for brigands. They don't carry swords, but Gabriel help the thief who falls afoul of their staves!"

"But the forest," John said. "It's all around us like a pride of griffins. With green, scaly wings. They look as if they're going to eat up the road. They've already nibbled away the edges, and"—he lowered his voice—"she came out of the forest, didn't she?"

Stephen laughed. "She came out of the sky, simpleton! Didn't you hear her say she don't know nothing about the forest?"

Before John could lecture Stephen on his lapse in grammar, Ruth exploded between them, as green as a down in the tenderness of spring. She blazed in Stephen's tunic, its hood drawn over her head. She had bound her waist with the gold sash from her robe and, discarding her velvet slippers, donned his wooden clogs, whose very ugliness emphasized the delicacy of her bare feet. She had bundled her linen robe around her slippers and crucifix.

"No one would ever guess that I'm an angel," she smiled. "Or even a girl."

"Not an angel," said Stephen appreciatively. "But a girl, yes. You'd have to roughen your hands and hide your curls to pass for a boy."

She made a pretence of hiding her hair, but furtively shook additional curls from her hood the moment they resumed their journey, and began to sing a familiar song of the day:

In a valley of this restless mind,
I sought in mountain and in mead . . .

Though she sang about a man searching for Christ, the words rippled from her tongue as merrily as if she were singing a carol. John wished for his kettledrums and Stephen began to whistle. Thus, they forgot the desolation of the road, largely untraveled at such an hour and looking as if the griffin-scaly forest would soon complete its meal.

Then, swinging around a bend and almost trampling them, cantered a knight with a red cross painted on his shield—a Knight Templar, it semed—and after him, on a large piebald palfrey, a lady riding pillion behind a servant who never raised his eyes from the road. The knight frowned at them; in spite of the vows demanded of his order, he looked more dedicated to war than to God. But the lady smiled and asked their destination.

"I live in a castle up the road,"

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said John quickly in Norman French. Unlike his friends, he was dressed in the mode of a young gentleman, with a tunic of plum-colored linen instead of cheap muslin, and a samite belt brocaded with silver threads. Thus, he must be their spokesman. "I have come with my friends to search for chestnuts in the woods, and now we are going home."

The knight darkened his frown to a baleful glare and reined his steed, as if he suspected John of stealing a fine tunic to masquerade as the son of a gentleman. Boys of noble birth, even of twelve, did not as a rule go nutting with villeins whom they called their friends, and not at such an hour.

"We have passed no castle for many miles," he growled, laying a thick-veined hand on the hilt of his sword.

"My father's is well off the road, and the keep is low," answered John without hesitation. "In fact, it is called the Tortoise, and it is *very* hard to break, like a tortoise shell. Many a baron has tried!"

"Mind you get back to the Tortoise before dark," the lady admonished. "You haven't a shell yourself, and the Stane is dangerous after nightfall. My protector and I are bound for the castle of our friend, Philip the Boar. Is it far, do you know?"

"About two leagues," said John, and he gave her explicit directions in French so assured and polished that no one, not even the glowering knight, could doubt his Norman blood and his noble birth. It was always true of him that he was only frightened in anticipation. Now, with a wave and a courtly bow, he bade them Godspeed to the castle of the Boar, received a smile from the lady, and led his friends toward the mythical Tortoise.

"Such a handsome lad," he heard the lady exclaim, "and manly as well."

"If I hadn't been so scared," said Stephen, once a comforatble distance separated them from the knight, his lady, and the unresponsive servant, "I'd have split my tunic when you said your castle was named the Tortoise. There isn't a castle for the next ten miles! It's the first fib I ever heard you tell."

"You were scared too?" asked John, surprised at such an admission.

"You can bet your belt I was! They were lovers, you know. Bound for a tryst at the castle of the Boar. He winks at such things, I hear. Runs a regular brothel for the gentry, including himself. That lady has a husband somewhere, and the Knight Templar might just have run us through to keep us from carrying tales."

With the fall of darkness, they selected a broad and voluminous oak tree, rather like a thicket set on

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the mast of a ship, and between them the boys helped Ruth to climb the trunk. With nimble hands, she prepared a nest of leaves and moss in the crook of the tree and, having removed her clogs and hidden them, along with her crucifix, settled herself with the comfort of perfect familiarity. She seemed to have a talent for nests, above or below the ground. After she had eaten some bread and cheese and drunk some beer, she returned to the ground, stubbornly refusing assistance from either boy, and showed herself a more than adept climber.

"Is she angry with us?" asked John.

"She drank all that beer," explained Stephen, "and while she's gone—"

They scrambled to the edge of the nest and, bracing themselves against a limb, aimed at the next oak. Gleefully, John pretended that Ruth was crouching under the branches.

He was sorry to see her emerge from an elm instead of the inundated oak and rejoin them in the nest.

"I was looking for rushes to keep us warm," she said. "But I didn't find a single one. We'll have to lie close together." She chose the middle of the nest, anticipating, no doubt, a boy to warm her on either side, and Stephen obligingly stretched on her left.

With the speed and deftness of Lucifer disguised as a serpent, John wriggled between them, forcing Ruth to the far side of the nest. Much to his disappointment, she accepted the arrangement without protest and leaned against him with a fragrance of galangal, the aromatic plant imported from Outre-Mer and used as a base for perfume by the ladies of England.

"The stars are bright tonight," she said. "See, John, there's Arcturus peeping through the leaves, and there's Sirius, the North Star. The Vikings called it the Lamp of the Wanderer."

Stephen nudged him as if to say: "You see! Only an angel knows such things."

"Stephen," he whispered.

"Yes?"

"I'm not afraid anymore. Of leaving the castle. Not even of the forest!"

"Aren't you, John?"

"Because I'm not alone."

"I told you we were safe with our angel."

"I don't mean the angel." He made a pillow of Stephen's shoulder, and the scent of dogs and haylofts effaced Ruth's galangal.

"Go to sleep, little brother. Dream about London—and the Holy Land."

But fear returned to John before he could dream. At an hour with the feel of midnight, chill and misty and hushed of owls, he was roused by the blast of a horn and a simultaneous shriek like that of a

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hundred otters caught in a mill-wheel. The sounds seemed to come from a distance and yet were harsh enough to make him throw up his hands to his ears.

"Hunters have found a Mandrake!" cried Stephen, sitting up in the nest. "It's a moonless night, and it must be just after twelve. That's when they hunt, you know. They blow on a horn to muffle the shriek. Let's see what they've caught."

But John was not eager to leave the tree. "If they've killed a Mandrake, they won't want to share it. Besides, they might be brigands."

Ruth had also been roused by the shriek. "John is right," she said. "You shouldn't want to see such a horrible sight. A baby torn from the earth!"

"I'll stay and keep Ruth company," said John, but Stephen hauled him out of the nest and sent him slipping and scraping down the trunk.

"But we can't leave Ruth alone!" he groaned, picking himself up from a bed of acorns.

"Angels don't need protection. Hurry now, or we'll miss the hunters."

They found the Mandrake hunters across the road and deep among the trees, a pair of rough woodsmen, father and son to judge from their height, build, and flaxen hair, though the elder was as bent and brown as a much-used sickle, and his son wore a patch over one of his eyes. The woodsmen were contemplating a dead Mandrake the size and shape of a new-born baby, except for the dirt-trailing tendrils, the outsized genitals, and the greenish tangle of hair which had grown above ground with purple, bell-shaped flowers. The pathetic body twitched like a hatcheted chicken. Dead at its side and bound to it by a rope lay a dog with bloody ears.

Though the night was moonless and the great stars, Arcturus and Sirius, were veiled by the mist of the forest, one of the hunters carried a lantern, and John saw the Mandrake, the dog, the blood in an eerie, flickering light which made him remember Lucifer's fall to Hell and wonder if he and Stephen had fallen after him.

One of the woodsmen saw them. "Might have gotten yourselves killed, both of you," he scolded, digging beeswax out of his ears with his little finger. "Laid out like that old hound with busted eardrums." He removed a long-bladed knife from his tunic and under his father's direction—"no, no, clean and quick . . . cut it, don't bruise it"—sliced the Mandrake into little rootlike portions, resinous rather than bloody, which he wrapped in strips of muslin and placed carefully in a sharkskin pouch.

"One less of the devils," muttered the father, unbending himself to a rake instead of a sickle.

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"Another week and it'd have climbed right out of the ground. Joined its folk in the warrens."

"A Richard's ransom in aphro-aphro*disiacs!*" stuttered the son, completing the word with a flourish of triumph. The market for Mandrake roots was lucrative and inexhaustible: aging barons deserted by sexual powers; lovers whose love was unrequited. From Biblical times, the times of Jacob and Leah, the root had been recognized as the one infallible aphrodisiac. Yes, a Richard's ransom was hardly an overstatement. A man would pay gold and silver, land and livestock, to win his love or resurrect his lust.

When the woodsmen had finished their grisly disection, the son smiled at the boys and offered them a fragment the size of a small pea. "You fellows put this in a girl's gruel, and she'll climb all over you."

"He doesn't need it," said John, intercepting the gift. "Girls climb over him as it is. Like ants on a crock of sugar!"

"But you need it, eh?" laughed the son, winking his single eye at John. One-eyed serfs were common in France and England, and most of them had lost their eyes to angry masters and not in fights. Perhaps the young woodsman had not been prompt to deliver firewood for the hearth in a great hall. "Now you'll be the crock. But where's the sugar?"

"He'll have it," said Stephen, noticing John's embarrassment. "Sugar enough for a nest! Give him a year or two. He's only twelve." Then he pointed to the carcass of the dog. "Did you have to use a greyhound? Couldn't you have done it yourselves? After all, you had the wax in your ears."

"Everyone knows a dog gives a sharper jerk. Gets the whole Mandrake at once. Like pulling a tooth, root and all. Besides, he was an old dog. Not many more years in his bones. We can buy a whole kennel with what we make from the root."

When the men had departed, talking volubly about the sale of their treasure at the next fair, and how they would spend their money in secret and keep their lord from his customary third, the boys buried the dog.

"I wish they had put beeswax in his ears too," said Stephen bitterly. "And see where they whipped him to make him jump!"

"Beeswax doesn't help a dog," said John. "At least I read that in a bestiary. His ears are so keen that the shriek penetrates the wax and kills him anyway."

"It's no wonder the Mandrakes eat us. The way we drag their babies from the ground and cut them up! If it weren't for my parents, I could pity the poor little brutes. Now, a lot of dirty old men will strut like coxcombs and chase after kitchen wenches."

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"I suppose," said John, who had furtively buried the fragment of Mandrake with the dog, "the question is, who started eating whom first." Then he clutched Stephen's hand and said: "I think I'm going to be sick."

"No, you're not," said Stephen, steadying John with his arm. "We're going back to the tree and get some sleep."

But Stephen was trembling too; John could feel the tremors in his arm. He's sad for the dog, he thought. I *won't* be sick. It would only make him sadder.

Ruth was waiting for them with a look which they could not read in the misted light of the stars.

"We're sorry we left you so long," said Stephen, "but the hunters had just killed a Mandrake, and. . . ."

"I don't want to hear about it."

"Mandrakes can't climb trees, can they?" asked John. "The parents might be about, you know."

"Of course they can climb trees," said Stephen, who was very knowledgeable about the woods and improvised what he did not know. "They *are* trees, in a way. Roots at least."

"Do you think they suspect we're up here? They can't see us, but can they sniff us out?"

"I wish you two would stop talking about Mandrakes," snapped Ruth. "You would think they surrounded us, when everyone knows the poor creatures are almost extinct."

"Stephen's parents were killed by Mandrakes," said John sharply. He would have liked to slap the girl. She had a genius for interruptions or improprieties. It was proper and generous for Stephen to express compassion for a Mandrake baby, but unforgivable for this ignorant girl to sympathize with the whole murderous race. Her ethereal origins now seemed about as likely to him as an angel dancing on the head of a pin, a possibility which, to John's secret amusement, his Abbot had often debated with utmost seriousness.

Ruth gave a cry. "I didn't know."

"How could you?" said Stephen. "At least the ones who killed my parents fought like men. They didn't sneak up in the dark. They stormed out of the forest before dusk, waving their filthy arms and swinging clubs. We had a chance against them—except my mother, who was bringing us beer in the fields. We were haying at the time and we had our scythes for weapons. They only got one of us besides my parents, and we got four of them. It's the females who're really dangerous—the young ones who pass for human and come to live in the towns. The males can't do it; they're much too hairy right from the start, and—well, *you* know. Too well endowed. But the little girls look human, at least on the outside. Inside, it's a different matter—resin instead of blood;

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brown skeletons which're—what would you call them, John?"

"Fibrous."

Ruth listened in silence and shrank herself into a little ball. Like a diadem spider, thought John, with brilliant gold patterns. Drawing in her legs and looking half her size.

"Tell her about them, John," said Stephen, who was getting breathless from such a long speech. "You know the whole story." And then to Ruth: "He knows everything. French, English, Latin. All our kings and queens from Arthur down to bad old King John. Even those naughty pagan goddesses who went about naked and married their brothers."

John was delighted to continue the history. He liked to deliver lectures, but nobody except Stephen ever listened to him.

"In the old days, before the Crusades," said John, who warmed to his tale like a traveling story teller, "in the old days the Mandrakes lived in the forest, and they were so dirty and hairy that you could never mistake them for human. They weren't particular about their diet. They liked any meat—animal or human—and they trapped hunters in nets and roasted them over hot coals and then strewed their bones on the ground as we do with drumsticks at Michaelmas." Here, like a skilled jongleur, he paused and looked at Ruth to gauge the effect of his tale. The sight of her reassured him. If she pressed any harder against the edge of the nest, she would roll from the tree. "But one day a little Mandrake girl wandered out of the forest, and a simple blacksmith took her for a lost human child, naked and dirty from the woods, and took her into his family. The child grew plump and beautiful, the man and his wife grew peaked, and everyone said how generous it was for a poor blacksmith to give his choicest food—and there wasn't much food that winter for anyone—to a foundling. But in the summer the girl was run down and killed by a wagon loaded with hay. The townspeople were all ready to garrot the driver—until they noticed that the girl's blood was a mixture of normal red fluid and thick, viscous resin."

"What does 'viscous' mean?" interrupted Stephen.

"Gluey. Like that stuff that comes out of a spider when she's spinning her web. Thus, it was learned that Mandrakes are vampires as well as cannibals, and that the more they feed on humans, the less resinous their blood becomes, until the resin is almost replaced, though their bones never do turn white. But they have to keep on feeding or else their blood will revert.

"Well, the Mandrakes heard about the girl—from a runaway thief, no doubt, before they ate him—and how she had 'passed' un-

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til the accident. They decided to send some more of their girls into the villages, where life was easier than in the forest. Some of the Mandrakes slipped into houses at night and left their babies, well-scrubbed of course, in exchange for humans, which they carried off into the woods for you can imagine what foul purposes. The next morning the family would think that the fairies had brought them a changeling, and everyone knows that if you disown a fairy's child, you'll have bad luck for the rest of your life. It was a long time before the plan of the Mandrakes became generally known around the forest. Now, whenever a mother finds a strange baby in her crib, or a new child wanders into town, it's usually stuck with a knife. If resin flows out, the child is suffocated and burned. Still, an occasional Mandrake does manage to pass.

"You see, they aren't at all like the Crusaders in the last century who became vampires when they marched through Hungary—the Hungarian campfollowers, remember, gave them the sickness, and then the Crusaders brought it back to England. They had to break the skin to get at your blood, and they had a cadaverous look about them before they fed, and then they grew pink and bloated. It was no problem to recognize and burn them. But the Mandrake girls, by pressing their lips against your skin, can draw blood right through the pores, and the horrible thing is that they don't look like vampires and sometimes they don't even know what they are or how they were born from a seed in the ground. They feed in a kind of dream and forget everything the next morning."

"I think it's monstrous," said Ruth.

"They are, aren't they?" agreed John happily, satisfied that his story had been a success.

"Not *them*. I mean sticking babies with knives."

"But how else can you tell them from roots? It's because a few people are sentimental like you that Mandrakes still manage to pass."

"Frankly," said Ruth, "I don't think Mandrakes pass at all. I think they keep to themselves in the forest and eat venison and berries and *not* hunters. Now go to sleep. From what you've told me, it's a long way to London. We all need some rest."

"Good night," said Stephen.

"Sweet dreams," said Ruth.

CHAPTER III

The next morning, the sun was a Saracen shield in the sky—Saladin's Shield, a Crusader would have said—and the forest twinkled with paths of sunlight and small white birds which spun in the air or perched on limbs and constantly flickered their tails. Ruth and Stephen stood in the crook of

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the tree and smiled down at John as he opened his eyes.

"We decided to let you sleep," said Stephen. "You grunted like a boar when I first shook you. So we followed a wagtail to find some breakfast."

"And found you some wild strawberries," said Ruth, her lips becomingly red from the fruit. She gave him a deep, brimming bowl. "I wove it from sedges." For one who professed an ignorance of the forest, she possessed some remarkable skills.

Once on the ground, they finished their breakfast with three-cornered, burry beechnuts, which required some skillful pounding and deft fingers to extract the kernels; and Ruth, appropriating Stephen's beer, took such a generous swallow that she drained the flask.

"To wash down the beechnuts," she explained.

"I don't know why the pigs like them so much," said Stephen. "They're not worth the trouble of shelling."

"The pigs don't shell them," reminded the practical John.

"Anyway," continued Stephen, "we hadn't much choice in this part of the forest. We found a stream though." Hoisting the pouch which held their remnants of food and their few extra garments, he said: "Ruth, get your bundle and let's take a swim."

"I hid it," she reminded him, almost snappishly. "There may be thieves about. I'll get it after we swim."

All that mystery about a crucifix, thought John. As if she suspected Stephen and me of being brigands. And after she drank our beer!

The stream idled instead of gushed, and pepperwort, shaped like four-leafed clovers, grew in the quiet waters along the banks. Stephen, who took a monthly bath in a tub with the stable hands while the daughters of villeins doused him with water, hurried to pull his tunic over his head. He was justly proud of his body and had once remarked to John, "The less I wear, the better I look. In a gentleman's clothes like yours, I'd still be a yokel. But naked—! Even gentlewomen seem to stare."

But John was quick to restore the proprieties. In the presence of Ruth, he had no intention of showing his thin, white body, or allowing Stephen to show his radiant nakedness.

"You can swim first," he said to her. "Stephen and I will wait in the woods."

"No," she laughed. "You go first. Stephen is already down to his breechclout, and *that* is about to fall. But I won't be far away."

"You won't peep, will you?" John called after her, but Ruth, striding into the forest as if she had a destination, did not answer him.

The stream was chilly in spite

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of the Saracen sun. John huddled among the pepperwort, the water as high as his knees, till Stephen drenched him with a monumental splash, and then they frolicked among the plants and into the current and scraped each other's backs with sand scooped from the bottom and, as far as John was concerned, Ruth and the road to London could wait till the Second Coming!

When they climbed at last on the bank, they rolled in the grass to dry their bodies. Stephen, an expert wrestler, surprised John with what he called his amphisbaena grip; his arms snaked around John's body like the ends of the two-headed serpent and flattened him on the ground.

"I'm holding you for ransom," he cried, perched on John's chest like the seasprite Dylan astride a dolphin. "Six flagons of beer with roasted malt!"

"I promise—" John began, and freed himself with such a burst of strength that Stephen sprawled in the grass beneath the lesser but hardly less insistent weight of John. "I promise you sixteen licks with an abbot's rod!"

Stephen was not disgruntled. "By Robin's bow," he cried, "you've learned all my tricks!"

"I guess we had better dress," said John, releasing his friend to avoid another reversal. "Ruth will want to swim too. I hope she didn't peep," he added, looking askance at some furiously agitated ferns beyond the grassy bank. To his great relief, they disgorged a white wagtail and not a girl. Still, something had frightened the bird.

"What do you think she would see?" laughed Stephen.

"You," said John, eyeing his friend with an admiration which was more wistful than envious. Stephen was a boy with a man's body, "roseate-brown from toe to crown," to quote a popular song, and comely enough to tempt an angel. When he shook his wet hair, a great armful of daffodils seemed to bestrew his head. A marriage of beauty and strength, thought John. For the hundredth time he marveled that such a boy could have chosen him for a brother; actually chosen, when they had no bond of blood, nor even of race. He peered down at himself and wished for his clothes. At the castle he never bathed in the tub with his father's friends: only with Stephen, sometimes, in the stream of the old millwheel, or alone in the heath from his own little bucket (even in the castle, he had no private room, but slept with the rancid sons of his father's knights).

But Stephen said: "You know, John, you're not so skinny now. You've started to fill out. The bones are there. The strength too, as you just proved. All you need is a little more meat. You'll be a man before you know it."

"Next year?" asked John, though

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such a prospect seemed as far from his grasp as a fiery-plummaged phoenix. "You were a man at thirteen."

"Eleven. But I'm different. I'm a villein. We grow fast. With you, I'd say two or possibly three more years. Then we can wench together for sure."

"Who would want me when she could have you?"

Stephen led him to the bank of the stream. "Look," he said, and pointed to their reflections in a space of clear water between the pepperworts: the bright and the dark, side by side; the two faces of the moon. "I have muscles, yes. But you have brains. They show in your face."

"I don't like my face. I won't even look in those glass mirrors they bring back from the Holy Land. I always look startled."

"Not as much as you did. Why, just since we left the castle, I've seen a change. Yesterday, when you faced down the Knight Templar, I was ready to wet my breechclout! But you never batted an eye. And you looked so *wise*. One day you'll have my muscles, but you can bet a brace of pheasants I'll never have your brains. Come on now, let's give Ruth a chance."

At Stephen's insistence—and he had to insist vigorously—they bundled their tunics and wore only their breechclouts, the shapeless strips of cloth which every man, whether priest, baron, or peasant, twisted around his loins. Now they would look like field hands stripped for a hot day's work, and John's fine tunic would not arouse suspicion or tempt thieves.

"But my shoulders," John began, "they're so white."

"They'll brown in the sun on the way to London," he said, and then: "RUTH, you can take your swim!"

He had to repeat her name before she answered in a thin, distant voice: "Yes, Stephen?"

"You can swim now. You'll have the stream to yourself." To John he smiled, "She took you seriously about not peeping. But you know, John, *we* didn't promise."

"You'd spy on an angel?"

Stephen slapped his back. "Now who's calling her an angel? No, I wouldn't spy. I'd just *think* about it. I've always wondered if angels are built like girls. Let's do a bit of exploring while she bathes. I could eat another breakfast after that swim. But we mustn't stray too far from the stream."

Beyond a coppice of young beeches, Stephen discovered a cluster of slender stalks with fragrant, wispy leaves. "Fennels. Good for the fever you catch in London. We might pick a few, roots and all."

But John, thinking of Mandrakes, had no use for roots and followed his nose to a bed of mint. "This is what your mother used to sweeten her gowns, isn't it?"

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"Yes, and it's also good to eat." They knelt in the moist soil to pluck and chew the leaves, whose sweetly burning juices left them hoarse and breathless, as if they had gulped a heady muscatel.

But where was the stream, the road, the oak in which they had slept?

"The trees all look the same," said Stephen, "but there, that old beech. Haven't we seen it before? And there, the torn ground—"

They had wandered, it seemed, to the place of the Mandrake hunt. The hole remained in the earth, disturbingly human-shaped, with branching clefts from which the limbs had been wrenched by the hapless dog.

"Let's get away from here," said John, as nausea slapped him like the foul air of a *garderobe.*

"Wait," said Stephen. "There's a second hole. It's—it's where we buried the dog. *God's bowels!*" It was his crudest oath. "The dirty Infidels have dug him up and—"

Around the hole they saw a litter of bones . . . skull . . . femur . . . pelvis . . . stripped of their meat and scattered carelessly through the grass.

"Stephen," said John, seizing his friend's hand. "I know how you feel. It was cruel of them to eat the dog. But we've got to get away from here. They'll take us for the hunters!"

Something had waited for them.

At first it looked like a tree. No, a corpse exhumed from a grave with roots entwining its limbs. It wheezed; lurched; moved, swaying, toward them. It was bleached to the color of a beechnut trunk—at least, those parts of the skin (or was it bark?) which showed through the greenish forest of hair (or rootlets?). Red eyes burned in black hollows (tiny fire-dragons peering from caves, thought John). The mouth seemed a single hairlip until it split into a grin which revealed triangular teeth like those of a shark: to crush, tear, shred.

"Run!" screamed John, tugging at his friend, but proud Stephen had chosen to fight.

"Dog-eater!" He charged the Mandrake and used his head for a ram.

The creature buckled like a rotten door but flung out its limbs and enveloped Stephen into its fall; fallen, it seemed a vegetable octopus, lashing viny tentacles around its prey.

Unlike Stephen, John grew cold with anger instead of hot; blue instead of flushed; as if he had plunged in a river through broken ice. First he was stunned. Then the frost-caves of his brain functioned with crystalline clarity. He knew that he was young and relatively weak; against that bark-tough skin, his naked fists would beat in vain. A blind, weaponless charge would not avail his friend. He fell to his knees and mole-like clawed the ground. Pebbles. Pine

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cones. Beechnuts. Pretty, petty, useless. Then, a stone, large and jagged. With raw, bleeding hands, he wrestled the earth for his desperately needed weapon and, without regaining his feet, lunged at the fallen Mandrake. The fibrous skull cracked and splintered sickeningly beneath the stone and spewed him with resin and green vegetable matter like a cabbage crushed by a millstone.

"Stephen!" he cried, but the answer hissed above him, shrill with loathing:

"Human!"

Multitudinous fingers caught and bound him with coils of wild grapevine and dragged him, together with Stephen, over the bruising earth.

The Mandrake warrens were not so much habitations as lightless catacombs for avoiding men and animals. No one knew if the creatures had built them or found, enlarged, and connected natural caves and covered the floors with straw. John was painfully conscious as his thin body, little protected by the shreds of his breechclout, lurched and scraped down a tortuous passage like the throat of a dragon. His captors, he guessed, could see in the dark, but only the scraping of Stephen's body told him that he had not been separated from his friend.

"Mother of God," he breathed, "let him stay unconscious!"

For a long time he had to judge their passage from room to room by the sudden absence of straw which marked a doorway. Finally, a dim, capricious light announced their approach to a fire; a council chamber perhaps; the end of the brutal journey.

The room of the fire was a round, spacious chamber where Mandrake females were silently engaged in piling chunks of peat on a bed of coals. Neither roots nor branches were used as fuel, John saw, since that which began as a root did not use wood for any purpose. Wryly he wondered how the Mandrakes would feel if they knew that the fuel they burned had once been vegetation.

Their captors dumped them as men might deposit logs beside a hearth, and joined the women in feeding the fire. John was tightly trussed, his feet crossed, his hands behind his back, but he rolled his body to lie on his side and look at Stephen's face. His friend's cheeks were scratched; his forehead was blue with a large bruise; and the daffodils of his hair were wilted with blood and cobwebs.

"Stephen, Stephen, what have they done to you?" he whispered, biting his lip to stifle the threat of tears. His hero, fallen, moved him to tenderness transcending worship. For once he had to be strong for Stephen. He had to think of escape.

He examined the room. There

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were neither beds nor pallets. Apparently the Mandrakes slept in the smaller rooms and used their council chamber as a baron used his hall. It was here that they met to talk and feast. The earthen walls were blackened from many fires. Bones littered the straw, together with teeth, fur, and hair; inedible items. The stench of the refuse was overpowering and, coupled with that of excrement and urine, almost turned John's stomach. He fought nausea by wondering how his fastidious Abbot would have faced the situation: identified himself, no doubt, with Hercules in the Augean stables or Christ amid the corruptions of the Temple.

Then, across the room, he saw the crucifix. Yes, it was unmistakable, a huge stone cross. Latin, with arms of unequal length, and set in an alcove shaped like an apse. Turtle-backed stones served as seats. Between the seats the ground had been packed and brushed by the knees of suppliants. The place was clearly a chapel, and John remembered the tale—a myth, he had always supposed—that after the Christians had come to England with Augustine, a priest had visited the Mandrakes in their warrens. Once they had eaten him, they had reconsidered his words and adopted Christianity.

"Bantling-killer!"

A Mandrake slouched above him, exuding a smell of tarns stagnant with scum. His voice was gutteral and at first unintelligible. Bantling-killer. Of course. *Baby*-killer. The creature was speaking an early form of English. He went on to curse all athelings in their byrnies—knights in their mail—and to wish that the whale-road would swallow the last of them as they sailed to their wars in ring-prowed ships of wood. Then, having blasted John's people, he became specific and accused John and Stephen of having killed the bantling with their dog. *His* bantling, he growled, grown from his own seed. Though the Mandrakes copulated like men and animals, John gathered that their females gave birth to objects resembling acorns which they planted in the ground and nurtured into roots. If allowed by hunters to reach maturity, the roots burst from the ground like a turtle out of an egg, and their mothers bundled them into the warrens to join the tribe—hence, the word "bantling" from "bantle" or "bundle."

"No," John shook his head. "No. We did not kill your baby. Your bantling. It was hunters who killed him!"

The creature grinned. A grin, it seemed, was a Mandrake's one expression; anger or pleasure provoked the same bared teeth. Otherwise, he looked as vacant as a cabbage.

"Hunters," he said. "You."

The crowded room had grown

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as hot as the kitchen before a feast in a castle, but the figures tending the fire, hunched as if with the weight of dirt, toil, and time, seemed impervious to the heat. They had obviously built the fire to cook their dinner, and now they began to sharpen stakes on weathered stones. Even the stakes were tin instead of wood.

The whir of the flames must have alerted the young Mandrakes in the adjacent chambers. They trooped into the room and gathered, gesticulating, around the two captives. They had not yet lapsed into the tired shuffle of their elders; they looked both energetic and intelligent. Life in the forest, it seemed, slowly stultified quick minds and supple bodies. It was not surprising that the weary elders, however they hated men, should try to pass their daughters into the villages.

The girls John saw, except for one, appeared to be adolescents, but hair had already forested their arms and thickened their lips. The one exception, a child of perhaps four, twinkled a wistful prettiness through her grime. Her eyes had not yet reddened and sunken into their sockets; her mouth was the color of wild raspberries. She could still have passed.

The children seemed to have come from the midst of a game. Dice, it appeared, from the small white objects they rattled, a little like the whale-bone cubes which delighted the knights in John's castle. But the dice of the Mandrake children were not so much cubes as irregular, bony lumps scratched with figures. The Greeks, John recalled from the Abbot's lectures, had used the knucklebones of sheep and other animals in place of cubes.

But the Mandrake children had found a livelier game. They stripped John and Stephen of their breechclouts and began to prod their flesh with fingers like sharp carrots and taunt them for the inadequacy of human loins. The Mandrake boys, naked like their parents, possessed enormous genitals; hence, the potency of the murdered, fragmented roots as aphrodisiacs. Stephen stirred fitfully but to John's relief did not awake to find himself the object of ridicule. With excellent reason, he had always taken pride in the badge of his manhood, and to find himself surpassed and taunted by boys of eight and nine would have hurt him more than blows. Only the girl of four, staring reproachfully at her friends, took no part in the game.

A church bell chimed, eerily, impossibly it seemed to John in such a place, and a hush enthralled the room. An aged Mandrake, rather like a tree smothered by moss, hobbled among the silenced children and paused between John and Stephen. Examining. Deliberating. Choosing. He

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chose Stephen. When he tried to stoop, however, his back creaked like a rusty drawbridge. He will break, thought John. He will never reach the ground. But he reached the ground and gathered Stephen in his mossy arms.

"Bloody Saracen!" shouted John. "Take your hands off my friend!" Stretching prodigiously, he managed to burst the bonds which held his ankles and drive his knee into the Mandrake's groin. The creature gave such a yelp that red-hot pokers seemed to have gouged John's ears. He writhed on the ground and raised his hands to shut out the shriek and the pain. Shadows cobwebbed his brain. When he struggled back to clarity, Stephen lay in the chapel before the crucifix. Looming above him, the aged Mandrake stood like Abraham above Isaac. The other adults, perhaps twenty of them, sat on the turtle-shaped stones, while the children sat near the fire to watch the proceedings from which their elders had barred them. The impression John caught of their faces—brief, fleeting, hazy with smoke and the dim light of the room—was not one of malice or even curiosity, but respect and fear, and the pretty child had turned her back and buried her face in the arms of an older girl.

The officiating Mandrake intoned what seemed to be a prayer and a dedication. John caught words resembling "Father" and "Son" and realized with horror if not surprise that just as the Christian humans burned a Yule log and decked their castles with hawthorn, holly, and mistletoe in honor of Christ, so the Christian Mandrakes were dedicating Stephen to a different conception of the same Christ. First, the offering, then the feast. The same victim would serve both purposes.

He had already burst the grapevines which held his ankles. In spite of his bound hands, he struggled to his feet and reeled toward the chapel. Once, he had killed a Mandrake with cold implacability. Now he had turned to fire: the Greek fire of the East, hurled at ships and flung from walls; asphalt and crude petroleum, sulphur and lime, leaping and licking to the incandescence of Hell. He felt as if stones and Mandrakes must yield before his advance; as if Mary, the Mother of Christ, must descend from the castles of heaven or climb from the sanctuary of his heart and help him deliver his friend.

But the Mandrakes rose in a solid palisade; and, shrunk to a boy of twelve, he hammered his impotent fists against their wood.

"No," he sobbed, falling to his knees. "Me. Not Stephen."

"JOHN."

His name tolled through the room like the clash of a mace against an iron helmet. "John, he will be all right." Her flaxen hair, coarsened with dirt and leaves, ri-

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oted over her shoulders like tarnished gold coins. She wore her linen robe, but the white cloth had lost its purity to stains and tears. She might have been a fallen angel, and her eyes seemed to smoulder with memories of heaven or visions of Hell.

She had entered the room accompanied, not compelled. She was not their captive. She has gained their favor, he thought, by yielding to their lust. But God will forgive her if she saves my friend, and I, John, will serve her until I die. If she saves my friend—

He saw that she held her crucifix; gripped it as if you would have to sever the hand before you could pry her fingers from its gold arms.

One of her companions called to the priest, who stood impassively between his cross of stone and his congregation, and above Stephen. He neither spoke nor gestured, but disapproval boomed in his silence.

Ruth advanced to the fire and held her crucifix in the glow of the flames, which ignited the golden arms to a sun-washed sea, milkily glinting with pearls like Saracen ships, and the Mandrakes gazed on such a rarity as they had never seen with their poor sunken eyes or fancied in their dim vegetable brains. In some pathetic, childlike way, they must have resembled the men of the First Crusade who took Jerusalem from the Seljuk Turks and gazed, for the first time, at the Holy Sepulchre; whatever ignoble motives had led them to Outre-Mer, they were purged for that one transcendent moment of pride and avarice and poised between reverence and exaltation. It was the same with the Mandrakes.

The priest nodded in grudging acquiescence. Ruth approached him through the ranks of the Mandrakes, which parted murmurously like rushes before the advancing slippers of the wind, and placed the crucifix in his hands. His fingers stroked the gold with slow, loving caresses and paused delicately on the little mounds of the pearls. She did not wait to receive his dismissal. Without hesitation and without visible fear, she walked to John and unbound his hands.

"Help me with Stephen," she said. "I have traded the cross for your lives."

Once they had stooped from the shadows of the last cave and risen to face the late morning sun, the Mandrake left them without a look or a gesture, avid, it seemed, to return to the council chamber and the bartered crucifix. In the dark corridors, Stephen had regained consciousness but leaned on Ruth and John and allowed them to guide his steps, their own steps guided by the slow, creaking shuffle of the Mandrake.

"Stephen, are you all right?" John asked.

"Tired," he gasped, stretching

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his battered limbs in the grass and closing his eyes.

"And you, Ruth?" John looked at her with awe and wonderment and not a little fear. He had witnessed a miracle.

She did not look miraculous as she lay beside Stephen. Once she had seemed to shrink into a spider; now she reminded him of a wet linen tunic, flung to the ground, torn, trampled, forsaken.

"What happened, Ruth?"

"They found me by the bank after my swim. I reached for a stocking and looked up to see—them."

"And—?"

"They laid hands on me. Dragged me toward their warrens. I fought them, but the one who held me was very strong."

"And you thought of the crucifix? How they were Christians and might value it?"

"Yes. You remember, I had hidden it in our tree. I tried to make them understand that I would give them a treasure if they let me go. You know how they talk. Like little children just learning to speak. Words and phrases all run together. But strange, old-fashioned words. I kept shouting, 'Treasure, treasure!' but they didn't understand. Finally, I remembered an old word used by our ancestors. 'Folk-hoarding,' I cried, and 'Crucifix!' and they understood. They're very devout in their way. They grinned, argued, waved their snaky arms. Then they let me go. I led them to the tree. We passed the place where you and Stephen had fought. I saw bits of your breechclouts and knew their friends had captured you. I stopped in my tracks and said I wanted your freedom as well as mine. Otherwise, no exchange. One of them said, 'If crucifix ring-bright. If time—'

"They climbed right after me up the trunk of the tree. The sight of the crucifix as I unwrapped it made them hold their breath. I held it out to them, but they shook their heads. No, they wouldn't touch it. It was for their priest. They seemed to feel their own filth and ugliness might tarnish the gold or lessen the magic. They didn't grin or look vacant anymore. They looked as if they wanted to cry. They turned their backs and let me dress in the robe—and brought me here."

"And they kept their promise."

"Of course. They're Christians, aren't they?"

Her story troubled him. He had heard of many Christians who failed to keep promises; Crusaders, for example, with Greeks or Saracens. "But why—" he began, meaning to ask why the Mandrakes would feel bound by a promise to a hated human girl.

"We can't sit here all day," she interrupted. "They might change their minds, Christian or not. Where is the road?"

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Shakily they climbed to their feet, Stephen without help at his own request ("I must get my balance back."), and saw the trees which encircled and encaged them, great sycamores and greater oaks, looking as if they were sentient old kings in an old country, Celt, Roman, and Saxon, watchfully standing guard until the usurping Normans had felt the slow fingers of the land shape them to the lineaments of Britannia, Britain, England, as the paws and tongue of a bear sculpture her cub into her own small likeness.

"I think," said Stephen, "that the road lies *that* way."

But Stephen was still befuddled by the blows to his head. They walked for a long time and did not come to the road . . . but came to the Manor of Roses.

CHAPTER IV

I watched them as they struggled out of the forest, the stalwart boy supported by his friends, the slighter, dark-haired boy and the girl with angel hair. On a sunny morning, you see, I leave the Manor with the first twittering of sparrows and gather the white roses from the hedge which surrounds my estate, or visit the windmill, the first, I believe, in southern England, and watch the millstones, powered no longer by water, grinding grain for the bread of my kitchen. Now, it was afternoon. I had lunched in the shade of a mulberry tree (apricots, bread, and mead), returned to the hedge of roses, and seen the children. I must have gasped at the sight. They stopped and stared at me over the hedge. The girl stiffened and whispered to the boys. It was not a time when children called at strange manor houses. Startled sparrows, they seemed. Not in littleness or frailty, you understand. The girl and the older boy were more than children. It was rather their vulnerability. Something had almost broken them, and they did not know if I were hunter or friend. I had to prove my friendliness as if I were coaxing sparrows to eat from my hand.

"Follow the hedge to the right," I smiled. "You will see the gate. If you've come from the forest, you must be tired and hungry. I can give you food and a place to sleep." I had made a basket of roses out of my arms. I had no fear of thorns, with my gloves of antelope leather; my long, tight sleeves buttoned at the wrist; my wimple and cap; and my blue, ankle-length skirt, brocaded with star-colored fleurs-de-lis and hanging in folds from my low-belted waist. I watched the boys, clad in breechclouts clumsily fashioned from leaves, and envied them a man's freedom to dress and ride where he will (unless he dresses in armor and rides to war).

The youngest, the dark-haired boy, still supporting his friend, ad-

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dressed me with the courteous French of a gentleman:

"We are not attired for the company of a lady. You see, we have come from the forest." His face confirmed the impression of his speech. It is said that Saladin, England's noblest enemy, had such a face as a boy: ascetic, scholar, poet. But first and last, I saw his need and that of his friend, the Saxon lad with the build of wandering Aengus, the Great Youth, whose kisses were called his birds. Even the breechclout seemed an affront to his body. Still, he needed me. His mouth, though forced to a smile, was tight with fatigue and hunger, and a wound had raked his forehead. Both were spider-webbed with scratches.

The girl, though her white gown was stained and torn, resembled an angel sculptured from ivory and set in the tympanum of a London cathedral: beautiful, aloof, expressionless. She is tired, I thought. Weariness has drained her face. Later I will read her heart.

I met them at the wicket in the hedge, a gate so small and low that my son had jumped it in a single bound when he rode for the Stane and London.

I held out my arms to greet them; my armful of roses.

They kept their ground, the dark boy straining toward me, the girl away from me, the Saxon drawn between them.

"I can offer you more than flowers," I said, spilling the roses.

The Norman said, "My Lady, whom have we the honor of addressing?"

"I am called the Lady Mary. You have come to the Manor of Roses."

"I thought," he said, "you might be another Mary. Will you help my friend? He has suffered a blow to his head." But it was the Norman and not his friend I helped. He swayed on his feet, leaned to my strength, and caught my outstretched hand.

"I will soil your gown."

"With the good brown earth? It is the purest of all substances. The mother of roses."

"But you scattered your flowers on the ground."

"I have others." Supporting him with my arm and followed by his friends, I drew him toward the house.

Once, a moat had surrounded the Manor, but after my husband's death I had filled the water with earth and planted mulberry trees, aflutter now with linnets and silvery filamented with the webs of silkworms; the trees formed a smaller ring within the ring of the rose hedge to island but not to isolate my house, which was built of bricks instead of the cold grey stones preferred by the neighboring barons. My husband had offered to build me a manor for my wedding gift.

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"Build it of bricks," I had said. "The color of your hair."

"And stoutly," he said. But the high curtain wall with its oaken door, its rows of weathered bricks from a ruined Roman villa, and its narrow embrasures for bowmen to fire their arrows, had somehow a look of having lost its threat, like armor hung on the wall. Gabriel knows, I could not stand a siege with my poor, bedraggled retainers: gardeners, gatemen, cooks, seneschal, stable-boy—thirty in all, without a knight among them. The wasting fever had not been kind to the Manor of Roses.

The gatekeeper moved to help me with the boy. "He will tire you, my Lady."

I shook my head. No burden can equal the ache of emptiness.

Once we had entered the bailey, Sarah the cook, who had slipped out of the kitchen and thrown back her hood to catch some sun, tossed up her ponderous hands—I suspect it required some effort—and squealed, "My Lady, what have you found?"

"Children, what else? Sarah, hurry to the kitchen and prepare a meal such as young boys—young men—like. Pheasant and—"

"I know, I know," she said. "You forget I've sons of my own, who serve you every night!" Sarah, her three sons and her two daughters, were new to the Manor, but she acted as if she had been my nurse since childhood. "I know what young boys like. The beast of the chase and the fowl of the warren. All that flies and all that goes on hooves, and two of everything unless it's as big as a boar!" She waddled ahead of us up the stairs to the door and, laboriously genuflecting, vanished under the lintel with its wooden Madonna cradling the Holy Infant.

"It's a lovely house," said the Saxon boy in English. "It looks like an abbot's grange."

"A very rich abbot," explained the Norman, fearful no doubt that I had misunderstood his friend's compliment, since poor abbots lived in squalid cottages.

"I meant," stammered the Saxon, "it looks so bright and peaceful, with its Mother and Child, and its—" He waited for his friend to complete his sentence.

"Its two pointed roofs instead of battlements, and real windows instead of slits for archers, with *glass* in the windows! And Stephen, see the herb garden. Parsley, thyme, bay leaf, marjoram, mace, tarragon —"

"You know a lot about herbs," I said.

"I've read an herbal."

Once in the Manor, I took them to the bath. In all the Weald, I think, in all of England, no other house can claim a fountain for bathing enclosed under the roof. The mouth of a dolphin, hammered from bronze by the artisans of Constantinople, spewed a

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vigorous streamlet into a basin where Tritons gamboled on varicolored tiles. For baths in the cold of winter, I stuffed the dolphin's mouth and filled the basin with kettles hot from the kitchen.

"Your friend shall bathe first," I said to the boys. All of us now were speaking English. And to her: "Your name is—?"

When the girl was slow to answer, the Saxon said: "Ruth. She is our guardian angel. She rescued us."

"From wild beasts?"

"From Mandrakes."

I shuddered. "They are much in the woods, poor misshapen brutes. They have never harmed me, though. You must tell me later about your escape. Now then, Ruth. You shall have the bath to yourself. After you have bathed, I shall send you clothes, and a perfume made from musk, and . . ."

She looked at me with cool, veiled eyes. "You are very kind." I wanted to say to her: I am more than twice your age, and far less beautiful. Trust me, my dear. Trust me!

I turned to the boys. The Norman, I learned, was John; the Saxon, Stephen. "When Ruth has finished, it will be your turn."

"Thank you, my lady," said John. "We would like to bathe with a dolphin. But—"

"You would rather eat! What about bread and cheese and pennyroyal tea to hold you till time for supper? Or," I added quickly, "beer instead of tea." Pennyroyal! I had been too much with women.

"Beer," they said in one breath. "But," said John, "my brother has a wound."

"Brother?" I asked, surprised. A Norman gentleman and a Saxon peasant!

"We adopted each other. Have you something for his head?"

"For my stomach," grinned Stephen. "That's where I hurt the most."

"For both," I said.

The hall of my manor house is hot and damp in the summer, and cold in the winter even with pine logs, as big around as a keg of beer, crackling on the hearth. It has always been a room for men: shouting, roistering, warming themselves with mead. For myself, I prefer the solar, the room of many purposes in which I sleep and dine and weave, and entertain the friends who come infrequently now to visit me. I left the boys in the solar with three loaves of bread, two enormous cheeses, and a flagon of beer, and told them to eat and afterwards to bathe themselves with cloths dipped in camphor and wrap fresh linen around their waists.

"Call me after you've finished."

I had scarcely had time to find a gown for Ruth when I heard John's voice: "Lady Mary, we've finished."

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I found them so fragrant with camphor that I overlooked the patches of dirt they had left on their knees and elbows. The bread, cheese, and wine had vanished as if there had been a raid by kitchen elves, denied their nightly tribute of crumbs. I tended the boys' wounds with a paste of fennel and dittany and they yielded themselves to my fingers without embarrassment, sons to a mother, and made me feel as if my hands had rediscovered their purpose.

"It doesn't burn at all," said Stephen. "My father used a poultice of adder's flesh pounded with wood-lice and spiders. But it burned like the devil, and stank."

"Lady Mary's hands are like silk," said John. "That's why it doesn't burn."

The boys began to dress in tunics which had belonged to my son: John in green, with a fawn-colored cape drawn through a ring-brooch and knotted at his shoulder, and *chausses* or stockings to match the cape, and black leather shoes with straps; Stephen in blue, with a pale rose cape and silver *chausses,* but looking with each additional garment as if another chain had shackled him to the wall.

"I wouldn't show myself in the forest like this," he muttered. "I'd be taken for a pheasant and shot on sight."

"It's only for tonight," I said. "Don't you want to look the gallant for Ruth?"

"She's used to me naked. She'll take me for a jester."

"My lady."

Ruth had entered the room. She was dressed in a crimson gown or *cotte,* caught at the waist by a belt of gilded doeskin but falling around her feet in billows through which the toes of her slippers peeped like small green lizards. She had bound her hair in a moss-green net, and her yellow tresses twinkled like caged fireflies. (Strange, I always thought of her in terms of forest creatures: wild; unknowable; untamable.)

"My lady, the boys may have their bath. I thank you for sending me so lovely a gown."

"We've had our bath," said Stephen with indignation. "Can't you see we're dressed as gallants?"

"Lady Mary put fennel and dittany on our wounds," said John, "and now they don't hurt any more."

"And we're going to eat," said Stephen.

"Again," said John.

Ruth examined the solar and almost relaxed from her self-containment. "Why, it's lovely," she said, extending her arm to include the whole of the room. "It's all made of sunlight."

"Not entirely," I smiled, pointing to the high, raftered ceiling with its tie-beam and king-post. "Cobwebs collect unless I keep after Sarah's sons. They have to bring a ladder, you see, and they don't

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like dusting among the dark crevices. They're afraid of elves."

"But the rest," Ruth said. "There's no darkness anywhere."

The room was kindled with afternoon light from the windows: the fireplace, heaped with logs; a tall-backed chair with square sides and embroidered cushions or bankers; a huge recessed window shaped like an arch and filled with roseate panes of glass from Constantinople; and, hiding the wooden timbers of the floor, a Saracen carpet of polygons, red, yellow, and white, with a border of stylized Persian letters. My wainscotted walls, however, were purely English, their oaken panels painted the green of leaves and bordered with roses to match the carpet.

Ruth explored the room with the air of a girl familiar with beauty, its shapes and its colors, but not without wonder. She touched my loom with loving recognition and paused at my canopied bed to exclaim: *"It's like a silken tent!"*

"But the linnets," she said, pointing to the wicker cage which hung beside the bed. "Don't they miss the forest?"

"They are quite content. I feed them sunflower seeds and protect them from stoats and weasels. In return, they sing for me."

"Is it true that a caged linnet changes his song?"

"Yes. His voice softens."

"That's what I mean. The wildness goes."

"Shouldn't it, my dear?"

"I don't know, Lady Mary."

We sat on benches drawn to a wooden table with trestles, John and I across from Ruth and Stephen. My husband and I had been served in the great hall by nimble, soft-toed squires who received the dishes from kitchen menials. After his death, however, I began to dine in the solar instead of the hall. For the last year I had been served by Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego, the three illegimate sons of my cook, Sarah. As a rule, I liked to dine without ceremony, chatting with the sons—identical triplets with fiery red hair on their heads and arms, and thus their name: they seemed to have stepped out of a furnace. But tonight, for the sake of my guests, I had ordered Sarah and her two illegitimate daughters, Rahab and Magdalena, to prepare, and her sons to serve, a banquet instead of a supper. The daughters had laid the table with a rich brocade of Saracen knights astride their swift little ponies, and they had placed among the knights, as if it were under seige, a molded castle of sugar, rice-flour, and almond-paste.

After I had said the grace, the sons appeared with lavers, ewers, and napkins and passed them among my guests. Stephen lifted a laver to his mouth and started to drink, but John whispered frantically:

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"It isn't soup, it's to wash your hands."

"There'll be other things to drink," I promised.

"I haven't felt this clean since I was baptized!" Stephen laughed, splattering the table with water from his laver.

Both Ruth and John, though neither had eaten from dishes of beaten silver, were fully at ease with knives and spoons; they cut the pheasant and duck before they used their fingers and scooped the fish-and-crab-apple pie with the spoons. But Stephen watched his friends with wry perplexity.

"I never used a knife except to hunt or fish," he sighed. "I'll probably cut off a finger. Then you can see if I'm a Mandrake!"

"We'd know that already," said John. "You'd look like a hedgehog and somebody would have chopped you up a long-time ago for aphrodisiacs. You'd have brought a fortune." His gruesome remarks, I gathered, were meant to divert me from the fact that he had furtively dropped his knife, seized a pheasant, and wrestled off a wing. His motive was as obvious as it was generous. He did not wish to shame his friend by his own polished manners.

I laughed heartily for the first time since the death of my son. "Knives were always a nuisance. Spoons too. What are fingers for if not to eat with? So long as you don't bite yourself!" I wrenched a drumstick and thigh from the parent bird and felt the grease, warm and mouthwatering, ooze between my fingers. "Here," I said to Stephen. "Take hold of the thigh and we'll divide the piece." The bone parted, the meat split into decidedly unequal portions. Half of my drumstick accompanied John's thigh.

"It means you're destined for love," I said.

"He's already had it," said John. "Hay-lofts full of it."

"She doesn't mean that kind," said Stephen, suddenly serious. She means caring—taking care of —don't you, Lady Mary? I've had that too, of course." He looked at John.

"Then it means you'll always have it."

"I know," he said.

John smiled at Stephen and then at me, happy because the three of us were friends, but silent Ruth continued to cut her meat into snail-sized portions and lift them to her mouth with the fastidiousness of a nun (her fingers, however, made frequent trips).

Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego scurried between the solar and the kitchen, removing and replenishing, but it looked as if John and Stephen would never satisfy their hunger. With discrete if considerable assistance from Ruth, they downed three pheasants, two ducks, two fish-and-crabapple pies, and four tumblers of mead.

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"Leave some for us," hissed Shadrach in Stephen's ear. "This is the *last* bird." Stephen looked surprised, then penitent, and announced himself as full as a tick on the ear of a hound. Shadrach hurried the last bird back to the kitchen.

After the feast the boys told me about their adventures, encouraging rather than interrupting each other with such comments as, "You tell her about the stream with the pepperwort, John," or "Stephen, you're better about the fighting." John talked more because he was more at ease with words; Stephen gestured as much as he talked and sometimes asked John to finish a sentence for him; and Ruth said nothing until the end of the story, when she recounted, quietly, without once meeting my gaze, the episode of her capture and bargain with the Mandrakes. I studied her while she spoke. Shy? Aloof, I would say. Mistrustful. Of me, at least. Simple jealousy was not the explanation. I was hardly a rival for the kind of love she seemed to want from Stephen. No, it was not my beauty which troubled her, but the wisdom which youth supposes to come with age; in a word, my mature perceptions. There was something about her which she did not wish perceived.

"And now for the gifts," I said.

"Gifts?" cried John.

"Yes. The dessert of a feast is the gifts and not the pies."

"But we have nothing to give you."

"You have told me a wondrous and frightening story. No jongleur could have kept me more enthralled. And for you, I have—" I clapped my hands and Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego appeared with my gifts, some musical instruments which had once belonged to my son. For Ruth, a rebec, a pear-shaped instrument from the East, three-stringed and played with a bow; for the boys, twin nakers or kettledrums which Stephen strapped to his back and John began to pound with soft-headed wooden drumsticks.

Ruth hesitated with her rebec till Stephen turned and said, "Play for us, Ruth! What are you waiting for, a harp?"

Then Ruth joined them, the boys marching round and round the solar, Stephen first, John behind him pounding on the drums and thumping the carpet with his feet, and finally Ruth, playing with evident skill and forgetting to look remote and enigmatic. Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego had lingered in the doorway, and behind them Sarah appeared with her plump, swarthy daughters. I was not surprised when they started to sing; I was only surprised to find myself joining them in the latest popular song:

Summer is a-comin' in,
Loud sing cuckoo.

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Groweth seed and bloweth mead,
And springs the wood anew.
Sing, cuckoo!

In an hour the three musicians, their audience departed to the kitchen, had exhausted the energies which the meal had revived. Ruth sank in the chair beside the hearth. The boys, thanking me profusely for their gifts, climbed into the window seats. Stephen yawned and began to nod his head. John, in the opposite seat, gave him a warning kick.

"Come," I said to them. "There's a little room over the kitchen which used to belong to my son. The hall was too big, the solar too warm, he felt. I'll show you his room while Ruth prepares for bed. Ruth, we'll fix you a place in the window. You see how the boys are sitting opposite each other. I've only to join the seats with a wooden stool and add a few cushions to make a couch. Or" —and I made the offer, I fear, with visible reluctance — "you may share my own bed under the canopy."

"The window seats will be fine."

I pointed to the Aumbry, a wooden cupboard aswirl with wrought-iron scroll work, almost like the illuminated page of a psalter. "There's no lock. Open the doors and find yourself a nightdress while I show the boys their room."

My son's room was as small as a chapel in a keep, with one little square of a window, but the bed was wide as well as canopied, and irresistible to the tired boys.

"It's just like yours!" John cried.

"Smaller. But just as soft."

"At home I slept on a bench against the wall, in a room with eight other boys—sons of my father's knights. I got the wall bench because my father owned the castle."

"I slept on straw," said Stephen, touching the mattress, sitting, stretching himself at length, and uttering a huge, grateful sigh. "It's like a nest of puppies. What makes it so soft?"

"Goose-feathers."

"The geese we ate tonight—*their* feathers will stuff a mattress, won't they?"

"Two, I suspect." I fetched them a silk-covered bearskin from a small, crooked cupboard which my son had built at the age of thirteen. "And now I must see to Ruth."

I am not a reticent person, but the sight of the boys—Stephen in bed and sleepily smiling goodnight, John respectfully standing but sneaking an envious glance at his less respectful friend—wrenched me almost to tears. I did not trust myself to say that I was very glad to offer them my son's bed for as long as they chose to stay in the Manor of Roses.

I could only say: "Sleep as late as you like. Sarah can fix you breakfast at any hour."

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"You're very kind," said Stephen. "But tomorrow, I think, we must get an early start for London."

"London!" I cried. "But your wounds haven't healed!"

"They were just scratches really, and now you've cured them with your medicine, if we stayed, we might *never* want to go."

"I might never want you to go."

"But don't you see, Lady Mary, we have to fight for Jerusalem."

"You expect to succeed where kings have failed? Frederick Barbarossa? Richard-the-Lion-Hearted? Two little boys without a weapon between them!"

"We're not little boys," he protested. "I'm a young swain—*fifteen winters old*—and John here is a—stripling who will grow like a bindweed. Aren't you, John?"

"Grow, anyway," said John without enthusiasm. "But I don't see why we have to leave in the morning."

"Because of Ruth."

"And Ruth is your guardian angel?" I asked with an irony lost on the boy.

"Yes. Already she's saved our lives."

"Has she, Stephen? Has she? Sleep now. We'll talk tomorrow. I want to tell you about my own son."

I returned to the solar heavy of foot. It was well for Ruth that she had changed to a nightdress, joined the window seats with the necessary stool, and retired to bed in a tumble of cushions. Now, she was feigning sleep but forgetting to mimic the slow, deep breaths of the true sleeper. Well, I could question her tomorrow. One thing I knew. She would lead my boys on no unholy Crusade.

A chill in the air awakened me. It was not unusual for a hot summer day to grow wintry at night. I rose, lit a candle, and found additional coverlets for myself and Ruth. Her face seemed afloat in her golden hair; decapitated, somehow; or drowned.

I thought of the boys, shivering in the draft of their glassless window. I had not remembered to draw the canopy of their bed. In my linen nightdress and my pointed satin slippers which, like all the footwear expected of English ladies, cruelly pinched my toes, I passed through the hall and then the kitchen, tiptoed among the pallets of Sarah and her children stretched near the oven, and climbed a staircase whose steepness resembled a ladder.

Lifting aside a coarse leather curtain, I stood in the doorway of my son's room and looked at the boys. They had fallen asleep without extinguishing the pewter lamp which hung from a rod beside their bed. The bearskin covered their chins, and their bodies had met for warmth in the middle of the bed. I leaned above them and

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started to spread my coverlet. John, who was closer to me, opened his eyes and smiled.

"Mother," he said.

"Mary," I said, sitting on the edge of the bed.

"That's what I meant."

"I'm sorry I woke you."

"I'm glad. You came to bring us a coverlet, didn't you?"

"Yes. Won't we wake your brother?"

His smile broadened; he liked my acceptance of Stephen as his brother and equal. "Not our voices. Only if I got out of bed. Then he would feel me gone. But once he's asleep, he never hears anything, unless it's one of his hounds."

"You're really going tomorrow?"

"I don't want to go. I don't think Stephen does either. It's Ruth's idea. She whispered to him in the solar, when you and I were talking. But I heard her just the same. She said they must get to London. She said it was why she had come, and why she had saved us from the Mandrakes."

"Why won't she trust me, John?"

"I think she's afraid of you. Of what you might guess."

"What is there to guess?"

There was fear in his eyes. He looked at Stephen, asleep, and then at me. "I think that Ruth is a Mandrake. One who has passed."

I flinched. I had thought: thief, adventuress, harlot, carrier of the plague, but nothing so terrible as Mandrake. Though fear was a brand in my chest, I spoke quietly. I did not want to judge her until he had made his case. He might be a too imaginative child, frightened by the forest and now bewildered with sleep. He was only twelve. And yet, from what I had seen, I had thought him singularly rational for his years. Stephen, one might have said, would wake in the night and babble of Mandrake girls. Never John. Not without reason, at least.

"Why do you think that, John?"

His words cascaded like farthings from a purse cut by a pickpocket: swift, confused at times, and yet with a thread of logic which made me share his suspicions. Ruth's mysterious arrival in the Mithraeum. Her vague answers and her claim to forgetfulness. Her lore of the forest. Her shock and disgust when he and Stephen had told her about the Mandrake hunters. Her strangely successful bargain with the crucifix.

"And they kept their word," he said. "Even when they thought Stephen and I had killed one of their babies. It was as if they let us go so that she could *use* us."

"It's true they're Christians," I said. "I've found their stone crosses in the woods around my Manor. They might have felt bound by their word. An oath to a savage, especially a Christian savage, can be a sacred thing. Far more sacred

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than to some of our own Crusaders, who have sacked the towns of their sworn friends. Ruth may have told you the truth about the crucifix."

"I know," he said. "I know. It's wicked of me to suspect her. She's always been kind to me. She brought me strawberries in the forest once! And Stephen worships her. But I had to tell you, didn't I? She might have passed when she was a small child. Grown up in a village. But someone became suspicious. She fled to the forest. Took shelter in the Mithraeum where Stephen and I found her. You see, if I'm right—"

"We're all in danger. You and Stephen most of all. You have been exposed to her visitations. We shall have to learn the truth before you leave this house."

"You mean we must wound her? But if she passed a long time ago, we would have to cut to the bone."

"We wouldn't so much as scratch her. We would simply confront her with an accusation. Suppose she is a Mandrake. Either she knew already when she first met you or else her people told her in the forest. Told her with pride: 'See, we have let you grow soft and beautiful in the town!' Tomorrow we shall demand proof of her innocence. Innocent, she will offer herself to the knife. The offer alone will suffice. But a true Mandrake will surely refuse such a test, and then we will know her guilt."

"It's rather like trial by combat, isn't it?" he said at last. "God condemns the guilty. Pricks him with conscience until he loses the fight. But this way, there won't be a combat, just a trial. God will make Ruth reveal her guilt or innocence."

"And you and I will be His instruments. Nothing more."

"And if she's guilty?"

"We'll send her into the forest and let her rejoin her people."

"It will break Stephen's heart."

"It will save his life. Save him from Ruth—and from going to London. Without his angel, do you think he'll still persist in his foolish crusade? He will stay here with you and me. The Manor of Roses has need of two fine youths."

"You won't make him a servant because he's a villein? His ancestors were Saxon earls when mine were pirates."

"Mine were pirates too. Bloodthirsty ones, at that. No, you and Stephen shall both be my sons. You adopted him. Why shouldn't I?"

"You know," he said, "when you first spoke to us at the hedge—after we had come from the forest—you said we'd come to the Manor of Roses. At first I thought you meant the *manner* of roses. Without the capitals."

"Did you, John?"

"Yes. And it's quite true. Of the house, I mean, and you. The manner of roses."

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"But I have thorns to protect the ones I love. Ruth will feel them tomorrow." I knelt beside him and touched my lips to his cheek. It was not as if I were kissing him for the first time, but had kissed him every night for—how many years?—the years of my son when he rode to London.

"You're crying," he said.

"It's the smoke from the lamp. It has stung my eyes."

He clung to my neck, no longer a boy; a small child I could almost feed at my breast.

"I like your hair when it's loose," he said. "It's like a halo that comes all the way to your shoulders."

He fell asleep in my arms.

CHAPTER V

I woke to the strident twittering of sparrows. Their little shapes flickered against the window panes, and for once I regretted the glass. I would have liked them to flood the room with their unmelodious chirpings and share in my four-walled, raftered safety. Minikin beings, they reveled in the sun, noisily, valiantly, yet prey to eagle and hawk from the wilderness of sky, and the more they piped defiance, the more they invited death.

But other sparrows were not beyond my help.

I rose and dressed without assistance. I did not call Sarah's daughters to comb my hair and exclaim, "But it's like black samite!" and fasten the sleeves above my wrists and burden my fingers with jade and tourmaline. I did not wish to awaken Ruth. I dreaded the confrontation.

Encased from the tip of my toes to the crest of my hair, amber and green in wimple, robe, gloves, stockings, and slippers, I walked into the courtyard and sat on a bench among my herbs, lulled by the soft scent of lavender, but not from my hesitations; piqued by the sharp pungency of tarragon, but not to pride in what I must ask of Ruth.

The sun was as high as a belltower before the sounds from the solar told me that the children had waked and met. Ruth and Stephen were belaboring John when I entered the room. Stephen looked liberated in his breechclout, and Ruth disported herself in his green tunic, the one he had worn reluctantly to my feast, but without the *chausses* or the cape. They were telling John that he ought to follow their example and dress for the woods.

"You're white as a sheep this morning," chided Stephen. "Your shoulders need the sun."

John, engulfed by his cape and tunic, might have been ten instead of twelve. I pitied the child. He would have to side with me against his friends. He returned my smile with a slight nod of his head, as if to say, "It must be now."

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Stephen's voice was husky with gratitude: "Lady Mary, we must leave you and make our way to London. You've fed us and given us a roof, and we won't forget you. In a dark forest, you have been our candle. Your gifts—the drums and rebec—will help us to earn our passage to the Holy Land."

"Knights and abbots will throw you pennies," I said. "Robbers will steal them. It will take you a long time to earn your passage."

"But that's why we have to go! To start earning. And when we come back this way, we'll bring you a Saracen shield to hang above your hearth." He kissed my hand with a rough, impulsive tenderness. An aura of camphor wreathed him from yesterday's bath. He had combed his hair in a fringe across his forehead, like jonquils above his bluer-than-larkspur eyes. I thought how the work of the comb would soon be spoiled; the petals wilted by the great forest, tangled with cobwebs, matted perhaps with blood.

"I think you should know the nature of your company."

His eyes widened into a question. The innocence of them almost shook my resolve. "John? But he's my friend! If you mean he's very young, you ought to have seen him fight the Mandrakes."

"Ruth."

"Ruth is an angel." He made the statement as one might say, "I believe in God."

"You want her to be an angel. But is she, Stephen? Ask her."

He turned to Ruth for confirmation. "You said you came from the sky, didn't you?"

"I said I didn't remember." She stared at the Persian carpet and seemed to be counting the polygons or reading the cryptic letters woven into the border.

"But you said you remembered falling a great distance."

"There are other places to fall than out of the sky."

John spoke at last. "But you remembered things." His voice seemed disembodied. It might have come from the vault of a deep Mithraeum. "About the forest. Where to find wild strawberries. How to weave a cup out of rushes. How to escape from the Mandrakes."

"Ruth," I said. "Tell them who you are. Tell me. We want to know."

She began to tremble. "I don't know. I don't know." I was ready to pity her when she told the truth.

I walked to the Aumbry with slow, deliberate steps. In spite of my silken slippers, I placed each foot as if I were crushing a mite which threatened my roses. I opened the doors, knelt, and reached to the lowest shelf for a Saracen poniard, its ivory hilt emblazoned with sapphires in the shape of a running gazelle. The damascene blade was very sharp:

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steel inlaid with threads of silver.

There was steel in my voice as I said, "You are not to leave my house till I know who you are. I accepted you as a guest and friend. Now I have reason to believe that you are dangerous. To the boys, if not to me."

"You would harm me, Lady Mary?" She drank from the light of the window and joined the shadows near the hearth. I half expected her to dwindle into a spider and scuttle to safety among the dark rafters.

"I would ask you to undergo a test."

She said: "You think I am a Mandrake."

"I think you must show us that you are not a Mandrake." I walked toward her with the poniard. "My husband killed the Saracen who owned this blade. Wrestled him for it. Drove it into his heart. You see, the point is familiar with blood. It will know what to do."

"Lady Mary!" It was Stephen who stepped between us; charged, I should say, like an angry stag, and almost took the blade in his chest. "What are you saying, Lady Mary?"

"Ask her," I cried. "Ask her! Why does she fear the knife? Because it will prove her guilt!"

He struck my hand and the poniard fell to the floor. He gripped my shoulders. "Witch! You have blasphemed an angel!"

Anger had drained me; indignation; doubts. I dropped in his punishing hands. I wanted to sleep.

John awoke from his torpor and beat on his friend with desperate fists. "It's true, it's true! You must let her go!"

Stephen unleashed a kick like a javelin hurled from an arblast. I forgot the poniard; forgot to watch the girl. All I could see was John as he struck the doors of the Aumbry and sank, winded and groaning to the floor. Twisting from Stephen's fingers, I knelt to the wounded boy and took him in my arms.

"I'm not hurt," he gasped. "But Ruth . . . the poniard . . ."

I saw the flash of light on the blade in Ruth's hand. Stephen swayed on his feet, a stag no longer: a bear chained in a pit, baited by some, fed by others—how can he tell his tormentors from his friends? Wildly he stared from the boy he had hurt to the girl he had championed. Ruth walked toward me with soundless feet and eyes as cold as hornstones under a stream. She might have been dead.

The poniard flashed between us. I threw up my hands for defense: of myself and John. She brought the blade down sharply against her own hand, the mount of the palm below her thumb. I heard—I actually heard—the splitting of flesh, the rasp of metal on bone. The blade must have cut through half of her hand before it lodged

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in the bone, and then she withdrew it without a cry, with a sharp, quick jerk, like a fisherman removing a hook, and stretched her fingers to display her wound. The flesh parted to reveal white bone, and crimson blood, not in the least resinous, swelled to fill the part. She smiled at me with triumph but without malice, a young girl who had vindicated herself before an accuser more than twice her years.

"Did you think I mean to hurt you?" she said almost playfully and then, seeing her blood as it reddened the carpet, winced and dropped the poniard.

Stephen steadied her into the chair by the hearth and pressed her palm to staunch the flow.

"You are an evil woman," he glared at me. "Your beauty is a lie. It hides an old heart."

"Both of your friends are in pain," I said. "It isn't a time for curses."

He looked at John in my arms and stiffened as if he would drop Ruth's hand and come to his friend.

"No. Stay with Ruth." I helped John across the room to a seat in the window; the tinted panes ruddied his pale cheeks. "He will be all right. Ruth is in greater need. Let me tend her, Stephen."

"You shan't touch her."

Ruth spoke for herself. "The pain is very sharp. Can you ease it, Lady Mary?"

I treated the wound with a tincture of opium and powdered rose petals and swaddled her hand with linen. John rose from the window and stood behind me, in silent attendance on Ruth—and in antonement. Stephen, an active boy denied a chance to act, stammered to his friends:

"Forgive me, both of you. It was my Crusade, wasn't it? I brought you to this."

Ruth's face was as white as chalk-rubbed parchment awaiting the quill of a monk. Her smile was illumination. "But you see, Stephen, Lady Mary was right to a point. I am no more an angel than you are. Less, in fact. You're a dreamer. I'm a liar. I've lied to you from the start, as Lady Mary guessed. That's why I couldn't trust her—because I saw that she couldn't trust me. My name isn't Ruth, it's Madeleine. I didn't come from heaven but the Castle of the Boar, three miles from your own kennels. My father was noble of birth, brother to the Boar. But he hated the life of a knight—the hunts, the feasts, the joustings—and most of all, the Crusades without God's blessing. He left his brother's castle to live as a scholar in Chichester, above a butcher's shop. He earned his bread by copying manuscripts or reading the stars. It was he who taught me my languages—English and Norman French and Latin—and just as if I were a boy, the lore of the stars, the sea, and the forest. He also

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taught me to play the rebec and curtsey and use a spoon at the table. "Someday,' he said, 'you will marry a knight, a gentle one, I hope, if such still exist, and you have to be able to talk to him about a man's interests, and also delight him with the ways of a woman. Then he won't ride off to fight in a foolish Crusade, as most men do because of ignorant wives.' He taught me well and grew as poor as a Welshman. When he died of the plague last year, he left me pennies instead of pounds, and no relatives except my uncle, the Boar, who despised my father and took me into his castle only because I was brought to him by an abbot from Chichester.

"But the Boar was recently widowed, and he had a taste for women. Soon I began to please him. I think I must have grown—how shall I say it?—riper, more womanly. He took me hawking and praised my lore of the forest. I sat beside him at banquets, drank his beer, laughed at his bawdy tales, and almost forgot my Latin. But after a feast one night he followed me to the chapel and said unspeakable things. My own uncle! I hit him with a crucifix from the altar. No one stopped me when I left the castle. No one knew the master was not at his prayers! But where could I go? Where but Chichester. Perhaps the Abbot would give me shelter.

"But John, as I passed near your father's castle I heard a rider behind me. I ducked in a thicket of gorse and tumbled down some stairs into a dark vault. You see, I did have a kind of fall, though not from heaven. I was stiff and tired and scared, and I fell asleep and woke up to hear Stephen proclaiming me an angel and talking about London and the Holy Land. London! Wasn't that better than Chichester? Further away from my uncle? Stephen, I let you think me an angel because I was tired of men and their lust. I had heard stories about you even at the castle—your way with a wench. After I knew you, though, I *wanted* your way. You weren't at all the boy in the stories, but kind and trusting. But I couldn't admit my lie and lose your respect.

"As for the crucifix you found in my hands, I had stolen it from my uncle. He owed me *something*, I felt. I had heard him say it was worth a knight's ransom. I hoped to sell it and buy a seamstress' shop and marry a fine gentleman who brought me stockings to mend. When I traded it to the Mandrakes, it was just as I said. They kept their promise for the sake of their faith. You see, they were much more honest than I have been."

Stephen was very quiet. I had seen him pressed for words but never for gestures, the outstretched hand, the nod, the smile. I wanted to ease the silence with reassurances and apologies. But Ruth was

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looking to Stephen; it was he who must speak.

"Now I'm just another wench to you," she said with infinite wistfulness. "I should have told you the truth. Let you have your way. This way, I've nothing at all."

He thought for a long time before he spoke, and the words he found were not an accusation. "I think a part of me never really took you for an angel. At least, not after the first. I'm not good enough to deserve a guardian from heaven. Besides, you stirred me like a girl of flesh and blood. But I wanted a reason for running away. An excuse and a hope. I lacked courage, you see. It's a fearful thing for a villein to leave his master. John's father could have me killed, or cut off my hands and feet. So I lied to myself: An angel had come to guide me! We were both dishonest, Ruth—Madeleine."

"Ruth. That's the name you gave me."

"Ruth, we can still go to London. Without any lies between us." Gestures returned to him; he clasped her shoulders with the deference of a brother (and looked to John: "My arms are not yet filled"). "But Lady Mary, it was cruel of you to find the truth in such a way."

"She never meant to touch Ruth," said John. "Only to test her. It was things I told Lady Mary that made her suspicious."

"John, John," said Ruth, walking to him and placing her swaddled hand on his arm. "I know you've never liked me. You saw through my tale from the first. You thought I wanted your friend. You were right, of course. I wouldn't trade him for Robin Hood, if Robin were young again and Lord of the forest! But I never wished you ill. You were his chosen brother. How could I love him without loving you? I wanted to say: 'Don't be afraid of losing Stephen to me. It was you he loved first. If I take a part of his heart, it won't be a part that belongs to you. Can't you see, John, that the heart is like the catacombs of the old Christians? You can open a second chamber without closing the first. Trust your friend to have chambers for both of us.' But I said nothing. I would have shown me to be a girl instead of an angel."

"You're coming with us, John?" asked Stephen doubtfully. "I didn't mean to hurt you. It was like the time you stepped on my dog. But you forgave me then."

"There's no reason now why any of you should go," I said.

"There's no reason for us to stay."

"You'll go on a Crusade without a guardian angel?"

"We'll walk to London and then —who knows? Venice, Baghdad. Cathay! Maybe it was just to run away I wanted, and not to save Jerusalem." He pressed John be-

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tween his big hands. "You *are* coming, aren't you, brother?"

"No," said John. "No, Stephen. Lady Mary needs me."

"So does Stephen," said Ruth.

"Stephen is strong. I was never any use to him. Just the one he protected."

"Someday," said Ruth, "you'll realize that needing a person is the greatest gift you can give him."

"I need all of you," I said. "Stay here. Help me. Let me help you. London killed my son. It's a city forsaken by God."

Stephen shook his head. "We have to go, Ruth and I. The Boar might follow her here. She hurt his pride as well as his skull and stole his crucifix."

John said: "I'm going to stay."

I packed them provisions of bread, beer, and salted bacon; gave them the Saracen poniard to use against thieves or sell in London; and strapped the rebec and kettledrums on their backs.

"You must have a livelihood in London," I said, when Stephen wanted to leave the instruments with John.

I walked with Stephen and Ruth to the wicket and gave them directions for finding the road: Walk a mile to the east . . . look for the chestnut tree with a hole like a door in the trunk. . . .

But Stephen was looking over his shoulder for John.

"He stayed in the solar," I said. "He loves you too much to say good-bye."

"Or too little. Why else is he staying with you?"

"The world is a harsh place, Stephen. Harsher than the forest, and without any islands like the Manor of Roses." How could I make him understand that God had given me John in return for the son I had lost to the devil?

"I would be his island," said Stephen, his big frame shaken with sobs.

"Never mind," said Ruth. "Never mind. We'll come back for him, Stephen." And then to me: "My lady, we thank you for your hospitality." She curtsied and kissed my hand with surprising warmth.

I said: "May an angel truly watch over you."

They marched toward the forest as proud and straight as Vikings, in spite of their wounds and their burdens. No more tears for Stephen. Not a backward look. London. Baghdad. Cathay!

It was then that I saw the face in the dense foliage, a bleached moon in a dusk of tangled ivy.

"Ruth, Stephen," I started to call. "You are being watched!"

But she had no eye for the children. She was watching me. I had seen her several times in the forest. Something of curiosity—no, of awe—distinguished her from the gray, anonymous tribe. Perhaps it was she who had left the crosses around my estate, like charms to

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affright the devil. She had never threatened me. Once I had run from her. Like a wraith of mist before the onslaught of sunlight, she had wasted into the trees. I had paused and watched her with shame and pity.

Now, I walked toward her, compelled by a need which surpassed my fear. "I won't hurt you," I said. I was deathly afraid. Her friends could ooze from the trees and envelop me before I could cry for help. "I won't hurt you," I repeated. "I only want to talk."

The rank vegetable scent of her clogged my nostrils. I had always felt that the rose and the Mandrake represented the antitheses of the forest: grace and crookedness. Strange, though, now that I looked at her closely for the first time, she was like a crooked tree mistreated by many weathers; a natural object unanswerable to human concepts of beauty and ugliness.

Dredging archaic words from memories of old books, I spoke with soft emphasis. "Tell me," I said. "Why do you watch my house —my mead-hall? Is it treasure-rich to you? Broad-gabled?"

She caught my meaning at once. "Not mead-hall."

"What then? The roses perhaps? You may pick some if you like."

"Bantling."

"Bantling? *In my house?*"

She knelt and seized my hand and pressed her hairy lips against my knuckles.

"Here," she said.

I flung my hands to my ears as if I had heard a Mandrake shriek in the night. It was I who had shrieked. I fled . . . I fled. . . .

His eyes were closed, he rested against a cushion embroidered with children playing Hoodman Blind. He rose from his seat when he heard me enter the room.

"They're gone?"

"What? What did you say, John?"

"Stephen and Ruth are gone?"

"Yes."

He came toward me. "You're pale, Lady Mary. Don't be sad for me. I wanted to stay."

I said quietly: "I think you should go with your friends. They asked me to send you after them."

He blinked his eyes. The lids looked heavy and gray. "But I am staying to protect you. To be your son. You said—"

"It was really Stephen I wanted. You're only a little boy. Stephen is a young man. I would have taught him to be a gentleman and a knight. But now that he's gone, what do I need with a skinny child of twelve?"

"But I don't ask to be loved like Stephen!"

I caught him between my hands, and his lean, hard-muscled shoulders, the manhood stirring within him, belied my taunts.

"Go to him," I cried. "Now, John. You'll lose him if you wait!"

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Pallor drained from his face, like pain routed by opium. "Lady Mary," he whispered. "I think I understand. You *do* love me, don't you? Enough to let me go. So much—"

I dropped my hands from his shoulders. I must not touch him. I must not kiss him. "So much. So much. . . ."

Beyond the hedge, he turned and waved to me, laughing, and ran to catch his friends. Before he could reach the woods, Stephen blazed from the trees.

"I waited," he cried. "I knew you would come!"

The boys embraced in such a swirl of color, of whirling bodies and clattering kettle drums, that the fair might have come to London Town! Then, arm in arm with Ruth, they entered the woods:

Summer is a-comin' in,
Loud sing cuckoo. . . .

I, also, entered the woods. For a long time I knelt before one of the stone crosses left by the Mandrakes—set like a bulwark between enormous oaks to thwart whatever of evil, griffins, wolves, men, might threaten my house. My knees sank through the moss to ache against stone; my lips were dry of prayer. I knelt, waiting.

I did not turn when the vegetable scent of her was a palpable touch. I said: "Would you like to live with me in the mead-hall?"

Her cry was human; anguish born of ecstasy. I might have said: "Would you like to see the Holy Grail?"

"Serve you?"

"Help me. You and your friends. Share with me."

I leaned to the shy, tentative fingers which loosened my hair and spread my tresses, as one spreads a fine brocade to admire its weave and the delicacy of its figures.

"Bantling," she said. "Madonna-beautiful." What had John said? "I love your hair when it's loose. It's like a halo. . . ." Roses and I have this in common: we have been judged too kindly by the softness of our petals.

"I must go now. Those in the mead-hall would not welcome you. I shall have to send them away. For your sake—and theirs. Tomorrow I will meet you here and take you back with me."

Earth, the mother of roses, has many children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express with gratitude a large debt to *A History of Everyday Things in England: 1066-1499* by Marjorie and C.H.B. Quennell and *The Crusades* by Henry Treece. The songs quoted in my story are modernized versions of anonymous Old and Middle English lyrics.

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BOOKS

I WISH I HAD SEEN THE MOVIES. I keep promising myself I will not review "novelizations" without finding out first what the author was working from.

It is true, of course, that a book, any book, must properly be judged on its own: when the feely-smellies, or dream-helmets, or whatever, have relegated the quaint "talkie" to their dusty cans forever, the books will remain, at least in scholarly libraries, as part of the author's record of accomplishment.

Still, it would be nice to know how much of the James Bond element in the two recent offerings by major names in s-f derived from the films, and what part of the scientific and philosophic content is the nominal author's work. But I have had these two books for two months now, and have *not* got around to seeing the movies, so—

If you are one of the many readers who abandoned FANTASTIC VOYAGE [1] after the first installment in the *Saturday Evening Post,* you may have made a mistake. (As it happens, I have not seen the *Post's* version either—but I have heard the reactions of those who started it, and I have seen other *Post*-cut serials, most notably the hash-up of Richard McKenna's THE SAND PEBBLES. I may be throwing old stones unfairly here; perhaps the magazine version of VOYAGE is identical with the book, but—) As it happens, VOYAGE is at its weakest in the opening chapters; even if it appeared exactly as in the book, the first installment might well have been the last for Asimov fans, when there was no chance to riffle through the rest and see what was to come.

Because I am an Asimov fan, I prefer to make the assumption that the amusingly banal characters and the straight Gernsbackian plot were part of the situation-as-given. I further assume that, aside from the amount of money that must have been involved, Asimov's

[1] FANTASTIC VOYAGE, Isaac Asimov; Houghton Mifflin, 1966; 239 pp.; $3.95. (Novelization from the screenplay by Harry Kleiner, based on an original story by Otto Klement and Jay Lewis Bixby.)

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reason for doing the book was the opportunity afforded him by the basic plot element (as old as the field, and still fascinating) of a journey—literally with (laser) gun and, if not camera, at least radio and periscope—through the vascular canals. Oddly enough, Asimov the Biochemist has hardly ever combined with Asimov the S-F Writer in the past: almost all his work, and certainly the best of it, has been on psychological and sociological themes. This time, the Good Doctor takes us on a not-so-fantastic-after-all tour of his own domain, and the result is fascinating.

My suggestion is to start with Chapter Four. The exciting part, the voyage itself, begins in Chapter Five, and I would say to start there, except for some "Briefing" (the chapter title) in Four. If you find yourself at all confused about the characters, you can go back and skim through Three—but with a little patience, you can save that effort: you've seen them all in a hundred movies already, and you'll identify them.

For that matter, if you've been around more than fifteen years or so, you've read them before; they are the stock complement of the Good Old Days of Scientifiction—all of them but the hero, who as a matter of fact, starts out as "Granite" Grant and winds up as "Good Old Charlie" Grant. It is this sea(blood?)-change that makes me wish I'd seen the film: I suspect Ike may have added something to the original script.

The other "novelization" is Fritz Leiber's fat-and-fanciful new Tarzan book [2], where, again, I confess I had to force myself through the beginning; again, was glad I did so; again, for self-evident and rather more valid reasons, found myself confronting many old familiar characters (but a few new ones too); and, again, find myself wondering how much of the (gradually-developed) Secret-Agent-for-World-Peace characterization of Tarzan is Leiber's.

Perhaps this difficulty with openings is a natural hazard of "novelizing," where the author starts out with a predetermined background, plot, and set of characters, and must work his way gradually (and I suppose as unnoticeably as possible) inside them before they begin to acquire conviction. At any rate, in both books the break occurs when the introduction is over and the action begins: in this case, it is only when Tarzan is out of the airplane and tweeds, and back in the jungle, that Leiber's Tarzan evoked for me the same awed breathlessness that Burroughs' original awakened thirty or more years ago.

[2] TARZAN AND THE VALLEY OF GOLD, Fritz Leiber; Ballantine, 1966; 317 pp.; 75¢.

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Whether the True Burroughs Fans will feel the same way I cannot say. Burroughs himself no longer does the same thing for me. (Note: the Burroughs estate and Ballantine Books are to be commended, and warmly, for their good sense in breaking with tradition and publishing this book under its proper byline. Publishing practice in the past in such cases has ordinarily been to "discover" posthumous "unpublished" manuscripts, or to publish additions—especially movie "novelizations"—anonymously, or with the scriptwriter's name featured. This volume carries a brief preface by Hulbert Burroughs, Vice-President of Edgar Rice Burroughs, Inc., warmly crediting and admiring Leiber's work on the book.)

I don't know whether it is James Bond again, or Viet Nam, or the '30s replacing the '20s as the current pop fad, but spy-intrigue, political conspiracy, economic manipulation, and the strategy and tactics of revolution appear to be the key themes in a whole new batch of novels, with heroes and villains ranging from official Secret Agents and the world power combines to guerrilla leaders, underground cell members, and spying double agents.

Of course, Poul Anderson, Keith Laumer, Mack Reynolds, John Brunner, and others have been doing this sort of thing for some time. But—except for some of Reynolds and Brunner—the emphasis has usually been either on swashbuckle or satire. There is some of both in the current crop, but also an underlying vein of genuine speculative interest in the causes and effects of political intrigue, and its mechanisms, which is more than welcome in a field rather badly overplowed.

Perhaps the '30s fad *is* the major influence, because there is also a noticeable return, in many of the books, to the inclusion of some element of scientific speculation, or at least information, in science fiction. Frank Herbert, for instance, has buried some brilliant ecological extrapolation in THE GREEN BRAIN[3]. (The Secret Agent this time is a beautiful lady scientist Mata Hari.) Like DUNE (F&SF *Books* March 1965), the novel is over-contrived; unlike DUNE (where the ecology of the desert-civilization was presented as a novel-within-the-monumentally-long-novel) the basic concepts here run straight through the book, and while sometimes submerged by the complexities of the plot, they are essentially related to it. Also, the considerably shorter length makes the action-adventure move faster, and the idea development stand out more.

[3]THE GREEN BRAIN, Frank Herbert; Ace F379, 1966; 160 pp.; 40¢.

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As an addition to the memorable line of Mutated Insect stories, the book falls short because of plot incredibilities and stock characters. But there is some exciting and convincing jungle-adventure action, and the first absolutely valid and intriguing Giant Insects that I can recall.

As an attack on short-range know-it-all thinking involved in "pest" extermination campaigns, and our present attempts to supplant the natural biota with a premature planned-ecology based on the infant science of biochemistry, the book is both exciting and important. (But I wish the author had not succumbed to the same anthropomorphic-teleological thinking he attacks: his Giant Insects are directed by a Giant Brain which, of course, is, or was, human.)

The giant quasi-insects in Keith Roberts' THE FURIES [4] are a different breed altogether. Roberts is an extraordinarily prolific and talented young British writer, and I think it is unfortunate that he is being introduced in this country with his highly derivative science fiction rather than some of the charmingly original fantasy that has appeared in the British magazines. (Equally unfortunately, I think, he has elected to publish his sensitively-characterized sci-psychological stories, in both countries, under a completely independent pen-name.) The astonishing thing about FURIES is that it contrives to be so readable while saying nothing at all (informationally, thematically, any other way) that has not been said, and well said, over and over before. As with his story in ORBIT 1 (reviewed here in September) FURIES is a compound of other people's ideas handled just-that-little-bit-better. This time it's guerrilla warfare against invading e-t's—but don't confuse it with Eric Frank Russell on that account; Roberts writes about real people, and sometimes frighteningly real-seeming invaders.

Two other new novels are rather more serious in their consideration of the nature and strategies of revolution—although on the surface Allen Kim Lang's WILD AND OUTSIDE [5] is anything but serious. This is a funny, charming, plotful story about the damnedest secret agent ever: Eddie Keenan of Earth and the Mets, star shortstop and draftee, out to civilize the planet Melon with a quarterstaff and a baseball bat. And underneath it all, there is some of the most consistent, coherent, sociological thinking s-f has ever seen. Laugh along with Lang; then settle back and think it over.

[4] THE FURIES, Keith Roberts; Berkley F1177, 1966; 192 pp.; 50¢.
[5] WILD AND OUTSIDE, Allen Kim Lang; Chilton, 1966; 139 pp.; $3.95.

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Heinlein's THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS [6], on the other hand, is very sober indeed about its lessons in political economy and military and revolutionary principles; if you happen to be of the Heinlein-Anderson (or Nietsche-MacArthur-Goldwater) school of thought in these matters, you can take his premises seriously. Otherwise, my advice is to suspend your disbelief as willingly as, for instance, you probably will do in order to accept the computer-with-personality who (which?) is one of the alternate protagonists of the story. Given the two premises (that a computer can develop an ego; and that the determining factors in political-economic conflict are weaponry and military tactics) the book is a fascinatingly detailed narrative of colonial rebellion, soundly structured and excitingly told.

The fact is that revolution makes good story. Lang succeeds by basing his book on the solidest of conceptual bedrock, developing a strategy that cannot help but succeed, and then tossing in, as tactics, every bit of slapstick and/or colorful romance that comes to hand. Heinlein's strategy is at the least highly improbable; but he bulwarks it with magnificently realistic tactical detail—and he has another advantage. Whatever else he is doing, whether his mood is investigative, whimsical, or preachy, Heinlein never forgets that the business he went into was story-telling and he manages to tell a story, and tell it very well, on the way.

One *possible* minor exception to this dictum is the new story, "Free Men," in Ace's THE WORLDS OF ROBERT A. HEINLEIN [7]. But I prefer to believe that the lack of resolution here is the fault of a writer grown accustomed to much longer lengths, rather than a failure in Heinlein's native narrative sense. The other stories, familiar as they are, bear re-reading well enough to support my basic contention. ("Blowups Happen," "Searchlight," "Life-Line," "Solution Unsatisfactory.")

The contrast between the Lang and Heinlein novels recurs in a comparison between Heinlein's short story collection and Leiber's THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF.[8] I must disqualify myself from any evaluation of the merits of the Leiber collection—but I can say that the two volumes taken to-

[6] THE MOON IS A HARSH MISTRESS, Robert A. Heinlein; Putnam, 1966; 383 pp.; $5.95.

[7] THE WORLDS OF ROBERT A. HEINLEIN, Robert A. Heinlein; Ace F375, 1966; 189 pp. (author's intro and five short stories); 40¢.

[8] THE NIGHT OF THE WOLF, Fritz Leiber; Ballantine U2254; 221 pp. (four novelettes); 50¢.

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gether provide an entertainingly instructive illustration of two basic modes of science fiction. Leiber's logic is in his underlying situation and character development; Heinlein's is in the impeccable organization of plot and puzzle components. Heinlein may commence with the most wildly improbable hypothesis; Leiber may elaborate with the most bizarre details; both manage to sustain a conviction of plausibility for the duration of the story, and to leave something of color as well as thought behind.

The reissue of Kurt Vonnegut's first novel, PLAYER PIANO,[9] in hard cover, will be welcome news to Vonnegut fans, particularly those who have discovered him since the earlier edition went out of print. The novel holds up well, fifteen years later, suffering not at all by comparison with this year's crop of science fiction, and not unbearably by comparison with Vonnegut's own recent work. It is particularly interesting to rediscover here, in a 'conventional science fiction novel,' many of the themes of last year's unclassifiable and delightful GOD BLESS YOU, MR. ROSEWATER (F&SF *Books*, July 1965). One trusts the absence of a new Vonnegut novel this year indicates only that the next one will be bigger and newer than ever.

Other reissues of special interest are large-size durable paperbacks from the University of Nebraska Press, and from Dover Publications. "Bison," the trade name for the Nebraska books, has Mary Shelley's THE LAST MAN[10]—probably the earliest 'calamity fiction' novel in the modern vein. Set in the 21st century, it was first published in 1826, reissued (in a pirated edition) in 1833, and almost forgotten in the shadow of FRANKENSTEIN since then.

Dover's contribution is a trio of gothic novels edited by E. E. Bleiler: THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO, VATHEK, and THE VAMPIRE.[11] As with the Shelley, these have long been unavailable. If republications of this sort are due to the interest excited by H. Bruce Franklin's FUTURE PERFECT (F&SF *Books*, Sept. 1966), one might wish for as scholarly a book to be done by as excellent a publisher (Oxford) on Twentieth Century s-f: perhaps some of the fine work of the last half century would then be thought worth issuing in such editions as these.

Some notable non-fiction of in-

[9] PLAYER PIANO, Kurt Vonnegut, Jr.; Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1966 (new edition; originally publ. 1952); 295 pp.; $4.95.
[10] THE LAST MAN, Mary Shelley; University of Nebraska Press; 342 pp., $1.95.
[11] THE CASTLE OF OTRANTO, VATHEK, AND THE VAMPYRE, E. E. Bleiler, ed.; Dover, 1966; 291 pp., $2.00.

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terest to s-f readers has piled up on my shelf while I waited for a month when there was time and space to discuss them intelligently. But with the editor's absolute refusal to give me a full issue of the magazine to catch up on back reviews, I can only settle for recommending briefly those volumes that appeal to me on the basis of more casual than critical reading.

One in fact I have not opened; I have been saving it for plane reading on a trip to England—Fred Hoyle's GALAXIES, NUCLEI, AND QUASARS.[12] Well, actually I *opened* it, and glanced through enough to discover that Hoyle is here re-examining, and questioning, his own steady-state theory—and further to discover that like most of his non-fiction, it is eminently readable.

And, further to contradict myself, I *did* read Theodore J. Gordon's THE FUTURE,[13] almost a year ago, when I first received it. My apologies to author and publisher for the delay: it is a remarkably coherent and imaginative compendium of educated guesses about the future—next year and next century.

SPIRITS, STARS AND SPELLS[14] is the usual meticulous de Camp work—or doubly so, since this one is co-authored by L. Sprague *and* Catherine C. It is a fascinating study of magic, in history and practice.

There are also five recent volumes of the *Life* Science Library[15] series here. (Some readers will remember my praise last year for the volume on MAN IN SPACE, edited by Arthur C. Clarke.) Of the present handful, I found SHIPS and GIANT MOLECULES the most provocative in terms of imaginative and speculative vistas opened for me.

FLIGHT and WATER are both stimulating and informative if not *quite* as much so as the other two. THE MIND seems to offer less new

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[12] GALAXIES, NUCLEI, AND QUASARS, Fred Hoyle; Harper & Row, 1965; 160 pp., illustrated; $3.95.

[13] THE FUTURE, Theodore J. Gordon; St. Martin's Press, 1965; 180 pp. plus 4 pp. index; $3.95.

[14] SPIRITS, STARS AND SPELLS, L. Sprague de Camp and Catherine C. de Camp; Canaveral Press, 1966; 308 pp. plus notes, bibliography (10 pp.), and index (23 pp.); $5.95.

[15] Life Science Library volumes: Prepared by the editors named below, together with the editors of *Life*, and consulting editors, René Dubos, Henry Morganau, and C. P. Snow. All 200 pp., 8.5 x 11 inches, indexed, graphically illustrated. $3.95 each. Available only by mail from Time-Life Books, Time & Life Bldg., Chicago, Ill. 60611. WATER, eds. Luna B. Leopold & Kenneth S. Davis; SHIPS, eds. Edward V. Lewis & Robert O'Brien; FLIGHT, eds. H. Guyford Stever & James J. Haggerty; THE MIND, ed. John Rowan Wilson; GIANT MOLECULES, Herman F. Mark.

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information than one might have hoped; and perhaps it is a shade too dramatic in its presentation of some not-so-new material on drugs and thought control.

—JUDITH MERRIL

BOOKS RECEIVED

FICTION

THE TROUBLE TWISTERS, Poul Anderson; Doubleday 1966; 189 pp.; $3.95

WATCHERS OF THE DARK, Lloyd Biggle, Jr.; Doubleday 1966; 228 pp.; $4.50

SIBYL SUE BLUE, Rosel George Brown; Doubleday 1966; 183 pp.; $3.95

ANALOG 4, John W. Campbell, ed.; Doubleday 1966; 224 pp.; $4.50 (7 stories)

TIME PROBE: THE SCIENCES IN SCIENCE FICTION, Arthur C. Clarke, ed.; Delacorte 1966; 242 pp.; $4.95 (11 stories)

STRANGE SIGNPOSTS, AN ANTHOLOGY OF THE FANTASTIC, Roger Elwood and Sam Moskowitz, eds.; Holt Rinehart and Winston 1966; 319 pp.

MAKE ROOM! MAKE ROOM!, Harry Harrison; Doubleday 1966; 216 pp.; $3.95

OCTOBER THE FIRST IS TOO LATE, Fred Hoyle; Harper & Row 1966; 200 pp.; $3.95

RETEIF'S WAR, Keith Laumer; Doubleday 1966; 208 pp.; $3.95

GENERAL

PLANETS, Carl Sagan, Jonathan Norton Leonard and the Editors of Life; Time-Life Books 1966; 200 pp., illustrated; $3.95 (Available on order from Time-Life Books, Time & Life Bldg., Chicago, Ill. 60611)

THE LASER, Ben Patrusky; Dodd, Mead 1966; 128 pp., illustrated; $3.50

THE ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION OF THE UNIVERSE, E. Schatzman; Basic Books 1966; 287 pp. $8.50

PAPERBACKS

12 GREAT CLASSICS OF SCIENCE FICTION, Groff Conklin, ed.; Gold Medal 1966 (reissue); 192 pp.; 50¢

EXPLORERS OF THE INFINITE, Sam Moskowitz; Meridian 1966; 353 pp.; $1.95

THE SOLARIANS, Norman Spinrad; Paperback Library 1966; 160 pp.; 50¢

PHOENIX PRIME, Ted White; Lancer 1966; 188 pp.; 60¢

(A list of new books received will henceforth appear regularly in this column. Some, though not all of the books listed will be reviewed in future columns.)

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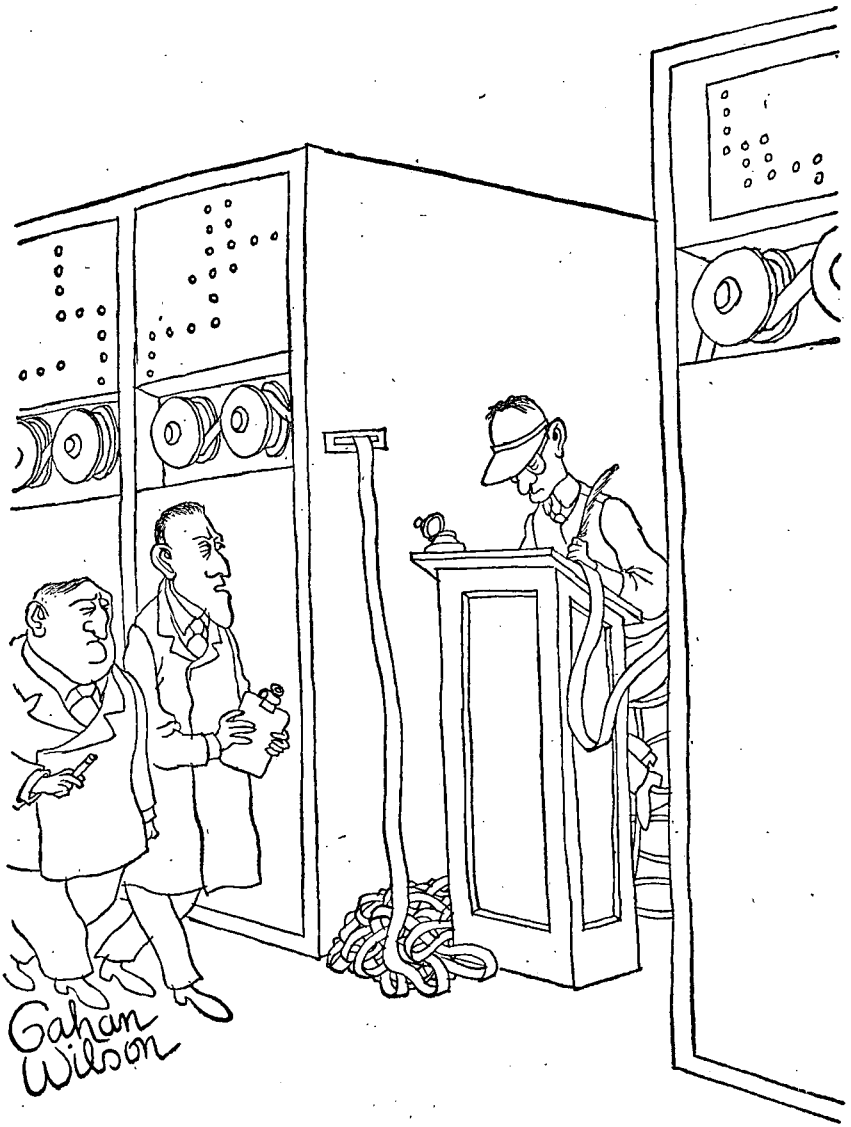

"I think you'll agree with me, Chief, that this time we've really put our finger on the bottleneck."

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A typically macabre childhood bull-session is the one which goes: "If you hadda die now, how would you like to go?" The "how" never went much beyond the immediate (and sometimes ingenious) instrument of destruction, but it was still quite a challenging pastime; one which, if it were practised seriously by adults, would lead to all sorts of fascinating situations . . .

THE BEST IS YET TO BE

by Bryce Walton

THE MORLEYS WERE INDEED durable as a couple, still together even after transfer to *Golden Rest Village*. And they were most grateful. They could still hold hands as they walked a railed garden path designed for the legally infirm. If one forgot the shared joy of a snowfall or a walk on a beach, the other might remember.

So Arthur Morley only left Lisa alone when she napped in the afternoons. Then he went to the hobbyshop and worked wistfully with clay. Wood-carving shops were out of bounds to Morley. He knew that his fingers, though twisted and knobble-knuckled, were still young enough. But statistics said knives shouldn't be trusted to anyone over ninety. So Morley couldn't carve wood. There was hardly anything they let you do anymore, Morley brooded.

He'd forgotten the time. He didn't want Lisa waking up by herself. He hurried toward the door while the clay he'd moulded into a leaping fish turned back into a cube.

As he reached the apartment door, Morley felt a sudden dizzy weakness. The door blurred. But he had seen those red-cross cards hanging on plenty of other doors, and the message:

"Emergency removal. Case-3582-W900. Call 9006-85772. These premises have been decontaminated, may be entered."

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You hardly ever heard or saw the ambulance helicopters. Every apartment had a special skylight, and the helicopters took you away usually at night. Those medical monitor boxes were everywhere. They telemetered symptoms, flashed out, brought automatic response with computer speed and efficiency. You didn't even get a chance to say goodbye.

Dazed with grief, Morley tried to control his emotions as he found the extension phone, dialed. Better snap out of it, old boy, he reminded himself. The monitored phone might pick up undue nervousness of tone, a crack or quaver, a danger signal. A symptom. A symptom that would demand immediate efficient preventive therapy. They always found warning symptoms long before you felt anything, then suddenly you were being wheeled away again. Or maybe there was one of those sneaky midnight social extractions through the skylight. All for your own good of course, Morley thought, his lips puckering in wry vertical lines. He made another mistake dialing. He was also sweating too much. Monitors were suspicious of sweat erupting in expertly plotted temperature. There. 9006-85772.

"This is Arthur Morley at *Golden Rest Five.* I'm calling about my wife, Lisa, who was just ta—"

The metallic voice cut in. "Please give the case number."

"Oh yes." Morley fumbled the red-cross card up to a bit of light from the window. "Case-3582-W900."

Click Click. "C-3582-W900 is suspected terminal, so please do not call again and help us keep lines open for necessary emergency calls. No visitors allowed because of infection dangers." *Click Click.* "C-3582-W900 is suspected terminal, so please do not call—"

Morley sat staring at the faint shine of the bed in the dark. Emptiness frosted the room. Endless and without reprieve, Morley knew, the way space is supposed to be. He touched the faint imprint left when Lisa's body was torn away. Later he fell across the bed and made strange rusty sounds as he cried for Lisa being taken when she was all alone. He kept thinking of that, of Lisa not even having anyone here to say goodbye and wherever she was, whatever was happening, no one to sit with her—

Morley tried to go along with the regular planned leisure and play routines. He tried not to show any suspicious signs of symptoms. He didn't want that helicopter taking him up through the skylight. Despite his long treatment as an elder, Morley still suffered apprehensions of being in the power of strangers.

But now he forgot to eat. He

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sometimes lost his grasp of logic and chronology. But if his thoughts turned muddy about many things, they were perfectly sensible about the good times with Lisa. And the further back he went in time, the better and clearer it all was, and he hated being brought back to the present and its meaningless games. But then he would imagine the helicopter and try not to show symptoms.

Then one night Morley had a thought so wild and daring that it had to come back the next night before he believed it. And he heard a sound he hadn't let himself hear for a long time. As he listened, the window glowed in the moonlight as lustrous as a clam shell. "Lisa," he thought, "you hear? The wild geese are going home. First of April, remember, when the ice goes out down on the marsh?"

An image of their summer cabin where marsh grass waded boldly into dark water crossed Morley's mind and left him weak with homesickness. They had spent most summers there where they had first met and made love on the beach. The cabin would probably be gone by now, but the sun and sea and sky would always be there where Lisa had pinned a quotation of Swinburne above a door: *While the sun and rain live, these shall be: till a last wind's breath upon all these blowing, Roll the sea.*

Morley started hiding away portions of his peanut and candy allowance. Three minutes later he got up and dressed in the dark with fumbling excitement. "Lisa, I'm going home. If I don't last, why I'd a lot sooner die on the way there as sit here and wait for them to carry me off to whatever it is. Anyway I'm game to try, for both of us."

If anyone saw a wandering old man they would bring him in or report him. For his own good, of course, like a lost child or a stray dog. So he'd have to stay off the roads, out of sight.

He got out a few things he'd managed to hold onto. They were in the closet. Fish hooks they'd used, now with the barbs sunk safely into an old bottle cork. A pen knife won at a carnival. Faded ticket stubs. Book of matches from the *Fox Bridge Inn*. Ball of string Lisa had saved from some Christmas packages. A monkey he'd carved for her out of peach seed. Morley used some of the string to tie up a blanket roll. He put on two pairs of pants, two shirts, then his jacket. He had no idea how well he could take cold after being protected from it so long. He straightened stiffly, feeling the absurd crackling of his joints as he stole to the door and opened it like a thief, his mouth dry and heart fluttering in his throat.

He crawled out shivering onto

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the fire-escape platform. The cold steel numbed his flesh as he clung there. An irrational concern held him clamped flat to the icy metal. He felt insubstantial in the dark. Too light. His sparse hair felt like cobweb in the wind. The wind would whirl him away like a moth or a dried seed pod. He knew that at one time a man had been allowed to keep going as he aged so he kept tuned to his limitations. But he'd been play-penned too long—his pampered body was alien to him. He had no real idea what it could do or for how long.

He finally risked the stretch from fire escape to the top of the wall, dropped and gasped as he clung there, his struggling breath so high and thin it might have come from a primitive reed instrument in his breastbone. There was no sound of alarm as he waited to catch his breath. But he felt a ripple of self-doubt at what he had done. How hard he was breathing already and how his knees ached.

He found the Big Dipper, the Pole star, then pushed off southeast toward Hammontown. This *Golden Rest* was east of Camden near a rundown part of the old sector. At Hammontown he'd be 15 miles off of Lower Bank, a few miles from Bittern Shoals. Little over 300 mile altogether. How many could he make in a day, or night? But he could make it, try anyway. Yes he could sure try it.

He would travel mostly at night. He'd stand less chance of being seen, and walking would help keep off the chill. He could rest up days in the warming sun. Right now he had to clear the Camden suburbs before daylight.

He ducked off into wilder brush as soon as he could. He wanted to make time but not push himself too hard. He had no way of gauging his limit. He already ached, hurt all over like one big bruised fingernail, and breathed hard like a whinnying horse. The cold night drove that wind deep into his bones. The ligaments between them had shrunk winter after winter, making short steps necessary. His joints didn't work smoothly, but cracked and bent raggedly. And there were the usual insistent bladder and kidney concerns. These aged absurdities bothered Morley only to worry him about his limitations.

But he walked, and his body protested. If he stopped to rest his body threatened to quit altogether, so he pushed himself on, drove himself warily. He walked deeper into fields and woods. The moon made his way oddly white and clear like a coating of frost. He knew when daylight was near, knew when the birds began their pre-dawn stirring and chattering in trees along the river bottom. He sank down groaning inside an abandoned shack that had once been part of an old sawmill.

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Boards rotted away from the shack wall had let in sun to dry out the top few inches of sawdust. It made a good bed. Morley lay and listened to old sounds coming back, awakening memories. The deep slow slide of the river and the occasional jump of a fish. Early robins singing. Morley went to sleep dreaming of the summer cabin that they had built partly out of driftwood where the new moon brought spring tide water lapping among the sea oats that fringed the estuary banks . . .

Afternoon warmed and woke Morley. Field mice watched him. It felt good until he sat up, then he was scared. Scared he couldn't go on far enough to get away from them. Every muscle throbbed, every joint hummed with pain. When he dug and forced himself onto his feet, the pain made him dizzy. And he had come only a few miles out of town. You can't cut the mustard, old boy, he said. But he forced himself to take a few steps outside, forced his face up to the sun as he gasped with pain. You can be back to *Village Rest* by sundown, Morley old boy. Even before that, because some one will see you, pity you, take you back. You'll be safe and warm enough there all right. You sure will—

But he took another step, and another. A cooling wind moved up the valley. Cottonwood leaves clattered. Another step and it was no better, but he took a third, groaned, forced himself to twist and bend, try to limber up enough to keep going. He munched peanuts and his body drew strength from the sun. When twilight came, Morley was able to shoulder his blanket roll and keep going. He had to concentrate on each step, and he allowed himself small noises of pain. After a while he didn't seem to feel it so much.

He walked that day and the next. He kept on walking. He walked nights, then risked walking some of the sun-lengthening days. The absurd weight of age kept hanging on him like something tied to a dog's tail, but he never again thought of turning back.

Whether it rained or not, Morley stopped worrying about where or how he would sleep. Something seemed to turn up when you didn't worry. He usually slept in the open when the sun was out full. Or he was sure to find an old shack or abandoned house, or a wrecked car, or a natural leanto where floodwater had heaped a dune of sand and brush up behind a fallen cottonwood. He ate peanuts and candybars. Later with a hook, Christmas string, and grubworm bait he caught perch and bullheads, planked them on wild cherry bark near a small, nearly smokeless fire. He tried to avoid any chance of being seen. People on a distant hillside looking like

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sheep grazing on grassy stubble, they were close enough for Morley's taste.

Days later a faint shimmering and tightening grew in the air. It puzzled Morley at first, then he remembered the reason for autumn. It reminds you that life must change, he remembered. Autumn is a recurring corrective, he thought. Strange seeds under there ripening to burst into life. Woodchucks, frogs, millions of insect beasts buried in mulch a few degrees away from death, waiting. He remembered.

Spring had come while Morley walked.

Hillsides, meadow lowlands, brown with the tag-end of winter, began to turn. April finished whispering over the land. Roots and buds heard, and grass appeared. A willow put out catkins. Morley watched the first fine fringe of green outline twigs against the sky, and one morning the green mist had settled over meadows and fields. Morley felt the old urgency of time at the root as he walked and watched a new world being born, repeated for the ten millionth time, yet never twice exactly the same. His blood quickened, sensing the almost forgotten rhythm. Green to green. Summer to summer, the regular heartbeat of life.

He walked and watched buds open, bulbs send up green hostages to the sun. He rested where wild roses grew along the pasture margins.

Morley's skin was no longer gray and slack. It had turned to dark mahogany and was stretched tightly over his bones. His blue eyes were no longer faded, but clear and reflected the blue of the sky. His eyebrows, sparse beard and hair were bleached pure white against the weathered brow.

He walked. Leaves thickened and heated up with vines and cobwebs along the river. Bumblebees began to drone and dragonflies hovered glinting over algae pools. Pressures of rising sap in the poplars forced buds out fat and bursting against the sky.

The next evening, Morley knew he had walked almost far enough. There was a familiar light in the southeast sky. Morley stood near a grove of cedars and wild raspberry where he intended to sleep that night. The river was below him, down a long steep slope, choked with trees and brush and thickening mist. Crickets trilled in the grassroots. Rabbits played in sweet clover. The sun had set, but its light was reflected all along the horizon against mist and cloud ripples, speckling all colors like a wet rainbow trout. Something else in that light could only come from the sea, a kind of silver luster like the glow of a clamshell. Then Morley heard that old familiar harsh barking voice in the sky. *Ha-a-a! Ha-a-a! Ha-a-a!*

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Flood gulls sweeping far off over the salt marshes, taking joy in flight and soaring motion as their voices throbbed and swelled. And then Morley felt the pulsing tides, smelled the tang of the sea.

He spread out his blankets and lay listening to the vast spring flight of birds into the sound country. He would get an early start. In another day or two he would reach the sea. He could already see the last spring tide, the moon's thin shell bringing the water lapping up among the sea oats that fringed the banks . . .

He woke up suddenly, feeling a bold charge of fear. The sun blinded his eyes as he tried to see through a break in the leaves, and the sound grew louder, as loud and rasping as a chorus of giant hungry flies. It kept getting louder. A shadow flowed over Morley like a huge hunting chicken hawk's. The buzzing stopped then all at once, and Morley remembered the sound. The helicopter.

He struggled up, but his throat was dry, and his mouth strained so widely open that his jaws ached. They knew he was here. They had landed just on the other side of the grove. It was no more than fifty yards downhill to the river. Morley crouched to run, but the Medics had brought something drugged and aching to the air. Morley's limbs knotted with the painful fixation of cramp. He started to move again, but there was a soft scratch of shoes in the grass. Morley turned. They stood only a few feet away, squinting in through the leaves. One of them started to unfold a portable stretcher, but the first Medic waved his hand. He was studying Morley with puzzled disbelief. "Mr. Morley doesn't seem to need that, Fred."

Morley sidled warily out of the brush. The Medics started incredulously at his clean sun-bleached clothes, browned skin stretched tight.

"You ready to come back with us now," the Medic said uneasily.

"No," Morley said.

The Medic's young dedicated eyes flickered dubiously and avoided Morley's. "So we can take proper care of you, sir."

"Why? I'm not bothering anything or anybody out here. Let me go on, go my own way."

"We can't do that, Mr. Morley. And you know it."

"Just one exception," Morley said. "Just overlook me, one more day. That would be enough."

The Medic slowly shook his head, twice.

"I can go on to Bittern Shoals then. It's where I started for, and it's only a little ways farther now. I don't mind dying at all, can't you understand that? I'm ready, I just want to go home."

The Medics started in disbelief. "You mustn't talk like that. You

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mustn't give up hope now, Mr. Morley. Never ought to let ourselves get depressed about that sort of thing. Where there's life, our marvelous doctors and equipment will make hope and together—"

"I've heard how it is in those wards," Morley whispered. "On a shelf with those tubes running out of me. I don't want that. Like the rats and chicken tissue I read about once—you keeping it alive for a hundred years."

The other Medic pushed forward, and Morley saw the familiar glint of a hypodermic syringe. He took a step back, feeling his heartbeats seem to stick together. Death is your enemy, Medic, he thought. Not mine. Death's victory is your personal defeat, yours and your master surgeons and your preservative chemicals and machines. You're so afraid of death aren't you, using us as a shield. Prolong our dying and make yourself think you might live forever young—

The Medics yelled after Morley as he ran down the hill. They ran after him, one of them holding the out-thrust syringe like a protective charm as they yelled for Morley to stop.

Morley kept going, going faster. His bound muscles impeded flow of movement, but he gained speed anyway on the steep slope, carried by his momentum, clothes flapping around his bones. Fear of them, and his own desperate longing, fused into a spastic grimace, a long shuddering paroxysm as much as a gait, neck muscles pulled back, legs jerking up and down, body jiggling in uncoordinate rhythms. One final spasm of careening speed with rasping intakes of convulsive breath and he was near enough to see the dark escape tunnels opening through the trees and hear the glide of the river. He could make it if he reached the concealment of the trees where the helicopter couldn't see him. He could escape down the river to the bay and Bittern Shoals. He reached and strained and sucked at air. Then something gave way. A constricted sound strangled up through morning air.

Morley rolled and the world pinwheeled as he reached for swirling leaves, and far up the hill behind him, the shadowy ectoplasmic figures of the Medics disappeared in a mist.

He kept moving, remembering only dark and light fading in and out, until he smelled the wild release that became the sea washing him forward to an unknown shore.

He hurried down the moonlit shine of wet sand. He had known the real things wouldn't change. And they hadn't changed, not at all, he thought, as he reached out where brown spume puffs of sea froth rolled like thistledown.

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"Lisa?" He waited, listened but her voice kept disappearing under that other sound of water moving, making that whispering song as it turned over windrows of jingle shells on wet sand. He heard her again and crawled on and finally saw her waiting where the moon lay on the water, and shells turned, gave way under his hands until he found her arms in the black weeds of the ebb.

Euthanasia, Dr. Glen was fond of saying, is more of an art than a science. During lectures to interns at the *Center for Dying*, he often used Arthur Morley as an example of a perfect individualized Happy Ending.

"We're terminating over 150,000 oldsters a month now," he said, "And every case demands highly subjective individual study and treatment if the departed is to experience a true Happy Ending. A properly balanced administering of LSD, suggestion, setting, mood and music and so forth are, of course, essential. And all this must be coordinated with a complete, absolutely accurate subjective analysis of the departing's dreams. What are his deepest genuine hopes and dreams? All must be blended, balanced, harmonized, played with orchestral artistry and skill of the highest order.

"No two departing will consider the same ending a happy one. And there are infinite personal variations in details of desire. Unique subjective knowledge of the individual must be your concern if the departed is to be assured the happiest rite of passage.

"Arthur Morley is my finest example. When his heart burst as he tried to run away from the helicopter, we were, of course, able to keep him alive through the immediate utilization of a glass heart. He was kept in a hypnothermic coma for another year. We had to make a thorough subjective study. He was revived enough to be questioned under various drugs. We made altogether more than three thousand re-experience runs and dream recordings before we were absolutely sure of being able to send him on with a Happy Ending. Ironically, perhaps, it turned out to be the same ending he had almost managed for himself. But we had no way of knowing that when he ran away, or tried to run away, to Bittern Shoals. We had to make all tests. We must always be *sure!* The one unpardonable sin for an euthanasiast is an unhappy ending.

"In any case, let me repeat that euthanasia is far more of an art than a science. I'll even go so far as to say that a Doctor of Euthanasia must be one of the greatest and most responsible of all contemporary artists.

"A song or a poem may be revised. But a man's last dying dream can be played only once." ◀

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The basic chemistry of all the Earth's organisms is strikingly similar, so that the great question for exobiologists (who study the possibility of life on other worlds) is whether living beings on other worlds will have this same biochemical pattern. Here is a story about a scientist who finds an answer to that question, and whose further experiments produce some curious and interesting results.

HEIR APPARENT

by Ed M. Clinton

My Dearest Roxanne,

I pray that this letter will turn your love not to hatred but will lead you to grant me compassion. When you have read it, it is possible, I think, that in spite of, or even because of what I have to tell you, you many even feel closer to me.

What I have to say is put simply but come to with anguish: the biography of my father, which I came to Centauri Station to research, will never be written, and I shall not, as I had originally planned, return to Earth and to you after two years. I will not be coming back at all.

Before I can tell you why this must be, I have to make you understand a little about this strange world that will be my home for the rest of my life.

Centauri Station, as you know, is one of three planets circling Alpha Centauri, a trifle smaller but a little denser than Earth, hence with about the same gravity. At this distance, Alpha Centauri is considerably dimmer and cooler than the sun is from Earth; so it is cold here. Though it is now midsummer, the temperature stays during the day around 45 degrees, and I am told that it is consistently subzero during a good part of the five-hundred-day year. The atmosphere is a little deficient in oxygen, too, which makes one tire more rapidly than on Earth,

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but I stand up better than most of the others in the settlement, in spite of their longer experience of it.

Though I find it fascinating, you wouldn't care for the terrain, which is everywhere a highly overgrown desert with hardly any elevations. There are some growths that might generously be called trees, standing upwards of three feet, and some of these bear tiny fruits which I find quite good. Otherwise, everything is close ground cover, short yellowish brush rather like stunted African veldt grass.

Strangest of all at first, though, is the sky. In one of his early diary entries, my father remarked that it was like "late afternoon on Earth, with a high, thin fog setting in—viewed through purple glasses." I can't imagine a more apt description. In all those years, apparently, he never got used to it; one of his last notes remarks on "that damned purple sky."

In spite of these forbidding conditions, there is a profusion of life, some vaguely reptilian, but no birds, and an immense variety of insects. The entomologists are a very busy group here.

But what brought my father, a cell biologist, to the Station thirty years ago was the presence of mammalian types, the only extraterrestrial mammals so far discovered. Of these, the prize is, of course, the magnificently agile *homo similis Centauri,* which everybody calls kipples because that's what they say all the time, endlessly repeating it: kipple, kipple. Graceful, long-limbed, docile, friendly, and strikingly human in appearance, they are just about brainless, with tiny heads behind great round eyes. They can be trained to simple tasks, such as fetching you a particular tool they have learned to identify or even washing the dishes, but that's about all. Their vocal equipment is quite elaborate and similar to man's, and a few have been taught to make other sounds than their eponymic exclamation. There's some theorizing that they are decendants of a species with decent brains that somehow changed. One of the pet dreams of the archaeologists—who up to now have had little to do but dream and scratch sand—has been to find some sign of a civilization maintained by these theoretical superkipples (which is what the rest of us call them to harass the archaeologists). Only recently they may have succeeded. "We've finally got a line on them," Bateson, head of the archaeological survey, told me the other day. "A thousand miles north of here, we think we've found fragments of some awfully old structures." There's an expedition setting up to look into the discovery.

My father's original project—what the government was paying

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him to do—was, in his words, "to find out what biochemical parallels exist in the cell structure and behavior of Centaurian and terrestrial mammals." The first thing he did on arrival was start yelling for more space. The settlement, of course, was much smaller and more primitive then. His diary gives some hint of this: "Work is almost impossible in these cramped quarters. The geologists, Harrison and Tooker, and I share the same laboratory—if that word can be used to describe the area we occupy. They clean out their equipment and pack it in boxes, which are stowed outside, and then I set up. Between us we spend more time setting up and taking down our gear than actually working. I have been thinking of trying to talk DeForgue, the meteorologist, out of a chunk of his working space on a permanent basis." He never succeeded in that.

Nowadays the geologists have a whole building to themselves and a staff of over forty. Harrison is still here, by the way, and has told me a lot about my father.

Anyway, by the time my father got adequate space, he, like everyone else, was spending time and money on things hardly called for in his contract—and having difficulty covering. But he kept his formal reports going, kept doing that work, obsessed though he was becoming with something else.

As everybody had anticipated, there are indeed great parallels in Centaurian and terrestrial cell structure. Father's success in defining these parallels was so brilliant that it eventually won him the coveted Kendig Award in Life Sciences, catapulting him to fame. After that he could almost write his own ticket, and the time was to come when he said he wanted to study "certain peculiarities in the genetic structure" of Centaurian mammals and was given a free hand to do so.

Father brought his wife Emily with him, because he expected to spend several years here. His diary indicates that she was becoming suspicious about some of the work he was secretly doing: "Well, I have set up the experiment here in our cottage. Emily doesn't know what it is; I just told her it was a setup that had to remain functioning without interruption for a long time, which is true, and that I couldn't fairly monopolize the necessary lab space all that while. She's curious, though, and sooner or later she'll probably break her rule about not inquiring into my work. And I suppose I'll have to tell her."

What he was doing was trying to cross-fertilize *homo-similis* and *homo sapiens*. Even in those early days they had a laser camera here, so that he was able to get detailed photographs of gene structures. This hadn't been done before, not because no one had thought of it,

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but because in any case it was one of countless things that wanted to be done—as soon as time permitted. When he did, he was shocked.

"If I hadn't done this myself, I would be unwilling to believe it, but the Centaurian's genes could almost stand for a human being's, a defective human pattern, to be sure. It's that defect I'm curious about."

On some pretext or other, he had arranged through Kraft, the physiologist here at the time, to obtain human sperm samples, and he had introduced them into the ovum of a female kipple, *in vitro.* He got data: "Fertilization has occurred. This is utterly unbelievable. I observed mitosis. I have photomicrographs, taken 39 hours after fertilization, showing the three-cell stage." I have those same photographs in front of me as I write. The paper is brittle and turning brown, but the images remain, and the three little cells that he saw are unmistakable. His next entry was noted, some hours later: "Cleavage has stopped. It has now been 51 hours since fertilization, and mitosis has not gone beyond the four-cell stage."

I do not know if he ever told Emily what the experiment involved, for she shortly became ill, and at this point gaps appear in his notes and in his meticulously kept diary. I suspect that her protracted illness and then her death disrupted his work completely.

But a short while after Emily died, he married again, a doctor at the settlement, the woman I have always assumed to be my mother. Her name was Penelope, and when they were married she was already past forty, a couple of years older than he. My recollections of her are of an aging, wan, rather sullen woman who took proper but utterly uninspired care of me while my father languished on this distant planet. As I grew older, I decided that her strange nature was the consequence of becoming a mother so late in life and subsequently being permanently separated from the man responsible for this. Now I entertain a different and much higher opinion of her. "Old Doc Penny," as we so ruthlessly called her behind her back, was a pretty brave person.

Harrison, the geologist, kind of hemmed and hawed when I asked about her, but he does like to talk about the old days, and it didn't take much prodding to get him to open up. Apparently the marriage was a complete surprise to the settlement, because Emily, after all, had been gone only a couple of months, and during her illness my father had been beside himself with distress and grief. Further, said Harrison, "Nobody liked Penny very much. She was a good doctor, but looks aside, and she'd not much of those, she was just not very feminine." The consensus

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was that the marriage was te result of a need for company and a fear of being alone after all those years, especially on this alien world.

"Your old man acted a lot differently after Emily died," Harrison told me. "He had always been a pretty sociable guy. Told a good story, too. But nobody could talk much to him after he and Penny married. Not even me, and we'd been damned good friends." When I asked him if he thought Penelope was the cause of this, he started beating around the bush some more, but finally blurted out what was bothering him. He tried to make a joke of it. "Fact is, I don't see how you were ever born, son, because as far as I could tell, your old man and Penny never slept together." Well, naturally, it was a joke, and we laughed and had some more of this strange and lovely white wine they've developed out here.

Then I found this diary entry: "Penny and I commence the new cross-fertilization experiment tomorrow. The implications of success are hard to imagine, but it will certainly establish a kinship between races separated by trillions of miles of space, reopening the whole question of the origin of life, and will be a giant step toward understanding the life process itself. As a cover, the experiment will be known to the government as 'Extra-Utero Viability of Laboratory-Fertilized *Homo Similis* Ova,' and research appropriate to such an experiment will be conducted on the side.

"Penny and I have two experiments going simultaneously: in one, an ovum provided by Penny will be fertilized by the sperm of a male *homo similis;* in the other, the ovum of a female *homo similis* will be fertilized by sperm provided by myself. Fertilization will be made to occur simultaneously. Time-lapse microphotography will provide us with a motion picture record of the critical early stages of meiosis, cleavage, and subsequent mitosis. Simultaneous spectral and physical biochemical analyses will be performed."

The experiment went well. "Cleavage successful in both ova. Morula stages past. Blastulae clearly forming." Then, later: "Something has gone wrong with the human ovum experiment. Mitosis has ceased. We are shutting down that setup. My progeny, however, is doing fine."

"His progeny" continued to do fine. Several times again, ova from Penelope were fertilized; each time, mitosis ceased at the same point. My father drew a tentative conclusion, which he subsequently verified, that there was a sex-linked characteristic that was lethal when the ovum was human—sex, as you know, being determined by the male. In each case, the male donor had been a differ-

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ent *similis*. "We are extremely busy keeping our test-tube hybrid alive. He—and it is a he—is now a true fetus. Our equipment, which we have nicknamed the mother machine, is working perfectly."

Now listen to this, Roxanne: "We have let it out that Penelope is pregnant and not taking it well. This will assure our being undisturbed during these critical last few weeks. When this amazing creature is born, when we turn off the mother machine and crack the little monster across its graceful fanny, for the time being the rest of the settlement is going to have to think it's Penny's and mine."

I've found some pictures of that damned "mother machine," which they disassembled and packed away immediately after "birth" took place. I also know where it is; it hasn't been touched since. There's an amazing amount of equipment around here that's no longer used and would be too costly to return to Earth, so it's just put away in the warehouse.

The birth occurred. "My God, I am excited. This is the greatest achievement of my life. I am holding him in my arms now, and he is quite human, but extraordinarily graceful. Penny has made some very careful measurements, and I've conducted a whole battery of tests. She says the physical proportions are distinctly *similis*, with a couple of minor exceptions. But it has a nice big forehead, and as far as his brain is concerned, he is human. We are going to call him Kip."

Yes, my dear, as you have probably already realized; the infant was your own loving Kip, the college athlete, the journalist who hated and now, in a strange way, admires the woman he thought was his mother. I am a monster, Roxanne. I am unique, not just as any living creature is unique unto itself, but unique in kind. That night, with the old, fading diary lying open on my desk, I drank an awful lot of Centaurian wine and yelled a lot of foul things at the purple sky. But I feel differently now.

Among my father's papers is a brilliant analysis of the whole experiment, why it succeeded, what my genetic structure is. He was able to determine that in virtually every physical characteristic, the *homo similis* genes were dominant or conferred a dominant tendency. He also confirmed by experiments the lethal sex-linked factor which would not let a *similis* male fertilize a human ovum. "It is as though I might reach in with my hand and pluck out the idea of forebrain. For that's what killed the developing embryos from the human ova: not only is the non-forebrain trait rigidly passed on by the father, but it acts in a lethally dominant fashion—it is lethal in the presence of a gene calling for

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forebrain development." Naturally, my father's sex-determinant gene did not carry with it this characteristic.

When I was a year old, Penny returned to Earth with me, leaving my father here. He lived out the rest of his life at Centauri Station, his work unreportable and diminishing in importance until, completely retired, he just stayed on, to no purpose as far as those on Earth who remembered his early work could tell. "Sometimes," a professor of mine once remarked to me, "the fire just flickers out. Newton did all his important work before he was twenty-five. I think something like that is what happened to your father."

What happened to my father lies buried in a scrawled note in his diary, something no person before myself has ever read. "I don't understand Penny at all. She has decided to return to Earth, taking Kip with her. She is destroying my life's work because it is essential that I follow the child at least through maturation. But there is nothing I can do to stop her. What has happened to that scientific spirit of two years ago?"

Poor Penny died before I was ten, before I had reached an age at which she could have told me, as I am positive she planned, what I had to cross four light-years of space to find out, and that accidentally.

My father conducted some radiation tests on *similis* genes. "I am more and more convinced that *similis* is the result of tampering, of genetic damage. It seems fantastic; when I let my imagination loose, it tells me that here we may see the results of the most insidious crime ever committed. The radiation levels which alter human genes approximately as the *similis* ones are defective, do not exist in local nature. I'll talk to the anthropologists in the morning."

During the night he died, one of the old men of the settlement. Since he had done nothing for years, as far as the rest of the Station was concerned, but putter, his notes, his diaries, and his equipment and personal effects were packed and stored in the warehouse without being examined; it would have been far too expensive to ship them to me, his only relative, on Earth. They put him in the dry Centaurian ground, in the cemetery just on the other side of the slight hill near the settlement.

I am looking in that direction now. It is north. Beyond it, a thousand miles by Bateson's estimate, are those hints of an ancient civilization, perhaps the victims of that great crime my father postulated. Something burns inside of me when I think of that. For the first time, in unknown millenia, a legatee of that civilization exists who is equipped to inherit it.

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Now, when I stand and watch the beautiful misty purple sky, or kneel down and run my fingers through the fine dry soil, or taste the fruit of that little tree that populates the desert, it all seems not so strange as it once did. I like the air, and the distant, sad disk of Alpha Centauri is pleasing to me.

I too am going to putter. My father's equipment and his copious notes remain. I could never be a research scientist, but I can be a mechanic, and I can repeat what he did.

Again, and again, and again. And sooner or later, one of my progeny will be female.

Then, we shall see what we shall see.

Your loving Kip.

COMING NEXT MONTH

Mallian, Son Hazelip High Man to the Hereditor of Land Qanaras, was a rogue in search of his fortune. And he thought his fortune found in the great engine of destruction, BUMBERBOOM. It was manned by a crew of half-wits, long bred only among themselves, and he could not imagine them the creators of this gigantic cannon. They could never have fashioned those immense wheels of stout wood reinforced with iron and rimmed with broad iron tires. Never could they have founded that gigantic tube whereon, in the casting, figures of beasts and monsters had been fixed; never devised that ornate breech in the shape of a bearded face with lips puckered as though whistling, nor the even more ornate and in fact frightening face which terminated the great tube's other end, mouth distended into an enormous shout—mouth silent now, but threatening of anything but silence.

Avram Davidson's story of BUMBERBOOM, the Juggernaut, is an adroit blending of the legends of the past with those of the far future, long after the Great Gene Shift, told in the rich narrative of an accomplished storyteller.

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EARTH TREMOR DETECTION

by Ted Thomas

AN EARTHQUAKE NORMALLY OCcurs in a fault in the earth when two rock bodies slip past one another. An explosion, on the other hand, normally produces a spherical pressure pulse. The trick is to tell the one from the other when you are sitting on the opposite side of the Earth. The problem is of some importance to the politicians who want to know if the Russians sneak in an extra underground nuclear detonation or two in violation of a treaty. To make the problem worse, there is the matter of earth tremors caused by waves breaking on shores, storms at sea, traffic and machinery, and the rocking of trees and buildings by the wind. When it comes to detecting nuclear earth tremors, the earth is full of background noise.

As a start, it is possible to filter out all the earth oscillations having periods of oscillation greater than about one second; the characteristic waves produced by small earthquakes and nuclear explosions remain. Next, the detection center can be located on a hard-rock site to reduce local interference. Another improvement comes about by using an array of seismographs instead of a single instrument; 21 clusters, each having 25 seismometers are now used. Increasing the instrument sensitivity has also helped. So it is now possible, with a fair degree of certainty, to detect an underground explosion in, say, Siberia.

These improved earth tremor detection systems ought to be very useful, particularly after being miniaturized and highly refined. Traffic patterns could be detected and controlled. Groups of people could be located. Acts of violence could be isolated. The landing of airplanes, the docking of boats, the movement of trains could all be part of the control pattern. A man's footfall is probably characteristic of him and him alone, like his fingerprint or voice pattern, and so it would be possible for those who were interested in him to know where he was at all times.

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In most everyone's memory bank of favorite fiction, there usually rests a Thurber story. It is the uncommon depth of James Thurber's humor which ensures vivid and lasting impressions, even if some of the drolleries or details are forgotten. When this story was suggested for reprint, along with the slightly off-center description: "the one about the man who dreamed he was Alexander Hamilton," Mrs. Helen Thurber was quickly able to provide the correct story and title (and, interestingly, tell us that this is one of her favorites). Here it is, then, for your enjoyment and retention.

A FRIEND TO ALEXANDER

by James Thurber

"I HAVE TAKEN TO DREAMING about Aaron Burr every night," Andrews said.

"What for?" said Mrs. Andrews.

"How do I know what for?" Andrews snarled. "What for, the woman says."

Mrs. Andrews did not flare up; she simply looked at her husband as he lay on the chaise longue in her bedroom in his heavy blue dressing gown, smoking a cigarette. Although he had just got out of bed, he looked haggard and tired. He kept biting his lower lip between puffs.

"Aaron Burr is a funny person to be dreaming about nowadays—I mean with all the countries in the world threatening each other. I wish you would go and see Dr. Fox," said Mrs. Andrews, taking her thumb from between the pages of her mystery novel and tossing the book toward the foot of her bed. She sat up straighter against her pillow. "Maybe haliver oil or B_1 is what you need," she said. "B_1 does wonders for people. I don't see why you see *him* in your dreams. *Where* do you see him?"

"Oh, places; in Washington Square or Bowling Green or on Broadway. I'll be talking to a

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woman in a victoria, a woman holding a white lace parasol, and suddenly there will be Burr, bowing and smiling and smelling like a carnation, telling his stories about France and getting off his insults."

Mrs. Andrews lighted a cigarette, although she rarely smoked until after lunch. "Who is the woman in the victoria?" she asked.

"What? How do I know? You know about people in dreams, don't you? They are nobody at all, or everybody."

"You see Aaron Burr plainly enough, though. I mean he isn't nobody or everybody."

"All right, all right," said Andrews. "You have me there. But I don't know who the woman is, and I don't care. Maybe it's Madame Jumel or Mittens Willett or a girl I knew in high school. That's not important."

"Who is Mittens Willett?" asked Mrs. Andrews.

"She was a famous New York actress in her day, fifty years ago or so. She's buried in an old cemetery on Second Avenue."

"That's very sad," said Mrs. Andrews.

"Why is it?" demanded Andrews, who was now pacing up and down the deep-red carpet.

"I mean she probably died young," said Mrs. Andrews. "Almost all women did in those days."

Andrews ignored her and walked over to a window and looked out at a neat, bleak street in the Fifties. "He's a vile, cynical cad," said Andrews, suddenly turning away from the window. "I was standing talking to Alexander Hamilton when Burr stepped up and slapped him in the face. When I looked at Hamilton, who do you suppose he was?"

"I don't know," said Mrs. Andrews. "Who was he?"

"He was my brother, the one who was killed by that drunkard in the cemetery."

Mrs. Andrews had never got that story straight and she didn't want to go into it again now; the facts in the tragic case and her way of getting them mixed up always drove Andrews into a white-faced fury. "I don't think we ought to dwell on your nightmare," said Mrs. Andrews. "I think we ought to get out more. We could go to the country for weekends."

Andrews wasn't listening; he was back at the window, staring out into the street again.

"I wish he'd go back to France and stay there," Andrews snapped out suddenly the next morning at breakfast.

"Who, dear?" said his wife. "Oh, you mean Aaron Burr. Did you dream about him again? I don't see why you dream about him all the time. Don't you think you ought to take some Luminal?"

"No," said Andrews. "I don't know. Last night he kept shoving Alexander around."

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"Alexander?"

"Hamilton. God knows I'm familiar enough with him to call him by his first name. He hides behind my coattails every night, or tries to."

"I was thinking we might go to the Old Drovers' Inn this weekend," said Mrs. Andrews. "You like it there."

"Hamilton has become not only my brother Walter but practically every other guy I have ever liked," said Andrews. "That's natural."

"Of course it is," she said. They got up from the table. "I do wish you'd go to Dr. Fox."

"I'm going to the zoo," he said, "and feed popcorn to the rhinoceros. That makes things seem right, for a little while, anyway."

It was two nights later at five o'clock in the morning that Andrews bumbled into his wife's bedroom in pajamas and bare feet, his hair in his eyes, his eyes wild. "He got him!" he croaked. "He got him! The bastard got him. Alexander fired into the air, he fired in the air and smiled at him, just like Walter, and that fiend from hell took deliberate aim—I saw him—I saw him take deliberate aim—he killed him in cold blood, the foul scum!"

Mrs. Andrews, not quite awake, was fumbling in the box containing the Nembutal while her husband ranted on. She made him take two of the little capsules, between his sobs.

Andrews didn't want to go to see Dr. Fox but he went to humor his wife. Dr. Fox leaned back in his swivel chair behind his desk and looked at Andrews. "Now, just what seems to be the trouble?" he asked.

"Nothing seems to be the trouble," said Andrews.

The doctor looked at Mrs. Andrews. "He has nightmares," she said.

"You look a little underweight, perhaps," said the doctor. "Are you eating well, getting enough exercise?"

"I'm not underweight," said Andrews. "I eat the way I always have and get the same exercise."

At this, Mrs. Andrews sat straighter in her chair and began to talk, while her husband lighted a cigarette. "You see, I think he's worried about something," she said, "because he always has this same dream. It's about his brother Walter, who was killed in a cemetery by a drunken man, only it isn't *really* about him."

The doctor did the best he could with this information. He cleared his throat, tapped on the glass top of his desk with the fingers of his right hand, and said, "Very few people are actually *killed* in cemeteries." Andrews stared at the doctor coldly and said nothing. "I wonder if you would mind stepping into the next room," the doctor said to him.

"Well, I hope you're satisfied," Andrews snapped at his wife as

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they left the doctor's office a half hour later. "You heard what he said. There's nothing the matter with me at all."

"I'm glad your heart is so fine," she told him. "He said it was fine, you know."

"Sure," said Andrews. "It's fine. Everything's fine." They got into a cab and drove home in silence.

"I was just thinking," said Mrs. Andrews, as the cab stopped in front of their apartment building, "I was just thinking that now that Alexander Hamilton is dead, you won't see anything more of Aaron Burr." The cab driver, who was handing Andrews change for a dollar bill, dropped a quarter.

Mrs. Andrews was wrong. Aaron Burr did not depart from her husband's dreams. Andrews said nothing about it for several mornings, but she could tell. He brooded over his breakfast, did not answer any of her questions, and jumped in his chair if she dropped a knife or spoon. "Are you still dreaming about that man?" she asked him finally.

"I wish I hadn't told you about it," he said. "Forget it, will you?"

"I can't forget it with you going on this way," she said. "I think you ought to see a psychiatrist. What does he do now?"

"What does who do now?" Andrews asked.

"Aaron Burr," she said. "I don't see why he keeps coming into your dreams now."

Andrews finished his coffee and stood up. "He goes around bragging that he did it with his eyes closed," he snarled. "He says he didn't even look. He claims he can hit the ace of spades at thirty paces blindfolded. Furthermore, since you asked what he does, he jostles me at parties now."

Mrs. Andrews stood up too and put her hand on her husband's shoulder. "I think you should stay out of this, Harry," she said. "It wasn't any business of yours, anyway, and it happened so long ago."

"I'm not getting into anything," said Andrews, his voice rising to a shout. "It's getting into me. Can't you see that?"

"I see that I've got to get you away from here," she said. "Maybe if you slept someplace else for a few nights, you wouldn't dream about him any more. Let's go to the country tomorrow. Let's go to the Lime Rock Lodge."

Andrews stood for a long while without answering her. "Why can't we go and visit the Crowleys?" he said finally. "They live in the country. Bob has a pistol and we could do a little target shooting."

"What do you want to shoot a pistol for?" she asked quickly. "I should think you'd want to get away from that."

"Yeh," he said, "sure," and there was a far-off look in his eyes. "Sure."

When they drove into the driveway of the Crowleys' house, several

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miles north of New Milford, late the next afternoon, Andrews was whistling "Bye-Bye Blackbird." Mrs. Andrews sighed contentedly and then, as her husband stopped the car, she began looking around wildly. "My bag!" she cried. "Did I forget to bring my bag?" He laughed his old, normal laugh for the first time in many days as he found the bag and handed it to her, and then, for the first time in many days, he leaned over and kissed her.

The Crowleys came out of the house and engulfed their guests in questions and exclamations. "How you been?" said Bob Crowley to Andrews, heartily putting an arm around his shoulder.

"Never better," said Andrews, "never better. Boy, is it good to be here!"

They were swept into the house to a shakerful of Bob Crowley's icy Martinis. Mrs. Andrews stole a happy glance over the edge of her glass at her husband's relaxed face.

When Mrs. Andrews awoke the next morning, her husband lay rigidly on his back in the bed next to hers, staring at the ceiling. "Oh, God," said Mrs. Andrews.

Andrews didn't move his head. "One Henry Andrews, an architect," he said suddenly in a mocking tone. "One Henry Andrews, an architect."

"What's the matter, Harry?" she asked. "Why don't you go back to sleep? It's only eight o'clock."

"That's what he calls me!" shouted Andrews. " 'One Henry Andrews, an architect,' he keeps saying in his nasty little sneering voice. 'One Henry Andrews, an architect.' "

"Please don't yell!" said Mrs. Andrews. "You'll wake the whole house. It's early. People want to sleep."

Andrews lowered his voice a little. "I'm beneath him," he snarled. "I'm just anybody. I'm a man in a gray suit. 'Be on your good behavior, my good man,' he says to me, 'or I shall have one of my lackeys give you a taste of the riding crop.' "

Mrs. Andrews sat up in bed. "Why should he say that to you?" she asked. "He wasn't such a great man, was he? I mean, didn't he try to sell Louisiana to the French, or something, behind Washington's back?"

"He was a scoundrel," said Andrews, "but a very brilliant mind."

Mrs. Andrews lay down again. "I was in hopes you weren't going to dream about him any more," she said. "I thought if I brought you up here—"

"It's him or me," said Andrews grimly. "I can't stand this forever."

"Neither can I," Mrs. Andrews said, and there was a hint of tears in her voice.

Andrews and his host spent most of the afternoon, as Mrs. Andrews had expected, shooting at targets on the edge of the wood

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behind the Crowley studio. After the first few rounds, Andrews surprised Crowley by standing with his back to the huge hulk of dead tree trunk on which the target was nailed, walking thirty paces ahead in a stiff-legged, stern-faced manner, with his revolver held at arm's length above his head, then turning suddenly and firing.

Crowley dropped to the ground, uninjured but scared. "What the hell's the big idea, Harry?" he yelled.

Andrews didn't say anything, but started to walk back to the tree again. Once more he stood with his back to the target and began stepping off the thirty paces.

"I think they kept their arm hanging straight down," Bob called to him. "I don't think they stuck it up in the air."

Andrews, still counting to himself, lowered his arm, and this time, as he turned at the thirtieth step, he whirled and fired from his hip, three times in rapid succession.

"Hey!" said Crowley.

Two of the shots missed the tree but the last one hit it, about two feet under the target. Crowley looked at his house guest oddly as Andrews began to walk back to the tree again, without a word, his lips tight, his eyes bright, his breath coming fast.

"What the hell?" Crowley said to himself. "Look, it's my turn," he called, but Andrews turned, then stalked ahead, unheeding. This time when he wheeled and fired, his eyes were closed.

"Good God Almighty, man!" said Crowley from the grass, where he lay flat on his stomach. "Hey, give me that gun, will you?" he demanded, getting to his feet.

Andrews let him take it. "I need a lot more practice, I guess," he said.

"Not with me standing around," said Crowley. "Come on, let's go back to the house and shake up a drink. I've got the jumps."

"I need a lot more practice," said Andrews again.

He got his practice next morning just as the sun came up and the light was hard and the air was cold. He had crawled softly out of bed, dressed silently, and crept out of the room. He knew where Crowley kept the target pistol and the cartridges. There would be a target on the tree trunk, just as high as a man's heart. Mrs. Andrews heard the shots first and sat sharply upright in bed, crying "Harry!" almost before she was awake. Then she heard more shots. She got up, put on a dressing gown, and went to the Crowley's door. She heard them moving about in their room. Alice opened the door and stepped out into the hall when Mrs. Andrews knocked. "Is Harry all right?" asked Mrs. Andrews. "Where is he? What is he doing?"

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"He's out shooting behind the studio, Bob says," Alice told her. "Bob'll go out and get him. Maybe he had a nightmare, or walked in his sleep."

"No," said Mrs. Andrews, "he never walks in his sleep. He's awake."

"Let's go down and put on some coffee," said Alice. "He'll need some."

Crowley came out of the bedroom and joined the women in the hallway. "I'll need some too," he said. "Good morning, Bess. I'll bring him back. What the hell's the matter with him, anyway?" He was down the stairs and gone before she could answer. She was glad of that.

"Come on," said Alice, taking her arm. They went down to the kitchen.

Mrs. Crowley found the butler in the kitchen, just standing there. "It's all right, Madison," she said. "You go back to bed. Tell Clotheta it's all right. Mr. Andrews is just shooting. He couldn't sleep."

"Yes, Ma'am," mumbled Madison, and went back to tell his wife that they said it was all right.

"It can't be right," said Clotheta, "shootin' pistols at this time of night."

"Hush up," Madison told her. He was shivering as he climbed back into bed.

"I wish dat man would go 'way from heah," grumbled Clotheta. "He's got a bad look to his eyes."

Andrews brightened Clotheta's life by going away late that afternoon. When he and his wife got in their car and drove off, the Crowleys slumped into chairs and looked at each other and said, "Well." Crowley got up finally to mix a drink. "What do you think is the matter with Harry?" he asked.

"I don't know," said his wife. "It's what Clotheta would call the shoots, I suppose."

"He said a funny thing when I went out and got him this morning," Crowley told her.

"I could stand a funny thing," she said.

"I asked him what the hell he was doing there in the freezing air with only his pants and shirt and shoes on. 'I'll get him one of these nights,' he said."

"Why don't you sleep in my room tonight?" Mrs. Andrews asked her husband as he finished his Scotch-and-water nightcap.

"You'd keep shaking me all night to keep me awake," he said. "You're afraid to let me meet him. Why do you always think everybody else is better than I am? I can outshoot him the best day he ever lived. Furthermore, I have a modern pistol. He has to use an old-fashioned single-shot muzzle-loader." Andrews laughed nastily.

"Is that quite fair?" his wife asked after a moment of thoughtful silence.

He jumped up from his chair.

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"What do I care if it's fair or not?" he snarled.

She got up too. "Don't be mad with me, Harry," she said. There were tears in her eyes.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said, taking her in his arms.

"I'm very unhappy," she sobbed.

"I'm sorry, darling," he said again. "Don't you worry about me. I'll be all right. I'll be fine." She was crying too wildly to say anything more.

When she kissed him good night later on she knew it was really goodbye. Women have a way of telling when you aren't coming back.

"Extraordinary," said Dr. Fox the next morning, letting Andrews' dead left hand fall back upon the bed. "His heart was as sound as a dollar when I examined him the other day. It has just stopped as if he had been shot."

Mrs. Andrews, through her tears, was looking at her dead husband's right hand. The three fingers next to the index finger were closed in stiffly on the palm, as if gripping the handle of a pistol. The taut thumb was doing its part to hold that invisible handle tightly and unwaveringly. But it was the index finger that Mrs. Andrews' eyes stayed on longest. It was only slightly curved inward, as if it were just about to press the trigger of the pistol. "Harry never even fired a shot," wailed Mrs. Andrews. "Aaron Burr killed him the way he killed Hamilton. Aaron Burr shot him through the heart. I knew he would. I knew he would."

Dr. Fox put an arm about the hysterical woman and led her from the room. "She is crazy," he said to himself. "Stark, raving crazy."

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The thing which struck us about a recent television show dramatizing an experiment with LSD was the frightening gap between its fantastically complex potential and its present uncertain, unsophisticated application. What does the future hold? Here's one possibility—a suspensful extrapolation which doesn't narrow any gaps, but rather thrusts the whole psychedelic package a few light-years beyond anything currently conceived of. And proves that science fiction itself is capable of a bit of mind-stretching on occasion.

NEUTRAL GROUND

by Norman Spinrad

A BOLT OF JAGGED BLUE LIGHTning rent the rolling red clouds, leaving a gash of orange-yellow in its wake that faded in a few moments and then disappeared.

Visual effect? Tyson wondered. Just some kind of after-image, or did the lightning or whatever it was cause some kind of unstable chemical change in the atmosphere?

He willed his disembodied ego forward, toward the base of the sheer black cliffs that towered in the distance, hard and majestic over the endless, featureless yellow sands.

There was a . . . *something* lurking by the cliffs. Tyson was viscerally sure of it. It was the same something that he had felt briefly before, in three of the other Places. He felt a curious mixture of fear and curiosity at the texture of the somethingness in his mind . . .

Something, call it curiosity perhaps, was pulling him toward the cliffs. But there was also a force in his mind holding him back, a force that increased in direct proportion to his nearness to the cliffs. He recognized the repelling force for what it was—fear.

He had felt the fear before, three times before, the same three times he had felt the presence of the something. He had felt it in the Place that was all stars and hardened brown lava fields, in the

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Place where ten great suns illuminated an endless, blinding plain of glare ice, in the Place of thousand-foot tall trees.

The fear was fear of the unknown something. It was not fear of the unknown as such, for all Voyages were into the unknown, and no Voyager had yet experienced the same Place twice.

It was the alienness of the something, an alienness that was as foreign to the Places as Tyson was. He could feel it, and it was that awareness that filled him with cold dread. What waited at the base of the black cliffs was no more a part of this reality than he was.

Mentally gritting his non-corporeal teeth, the point of view that was Tyson willed itself once more toward the cliffs. The yellow sands flowed under him, from the point of view of a man walking, though in the Places Tyson had neither feet nor legs. It was as if his ego were clinging desperately to the ghost of *bodyness*, though Tyson's body was far, far away.

Yet the closer he came, the slower he moved, for the fear was building up with his approach like the bow-wave of a boat moving not through water but through some thick syrup. . . .

Now the sands seemed to grow misty, vague, like melting mists. The black cliffs seemed to evaporate into billows of black smoke. . . . The smoke began to drift, dissipate. . . .

He knew the signs well. He was coming out of it. Another Voyage, another Place. . . . Another encounter with the *something*. . . .

There was blackness, emptyness, a swirl of omnidirectional motion. . . .

Burt Tyson felt the soft foam-rubber of the couch beneath his limp body. Sensation was returning to his limbs and trunk in a pins-and-needles tingle.

He opened his eyes. Yarmolinski's long, perpetually worried face was staring down at him.

"You all right, Burt?" Yarmolinski said mechanically.

"Of course, Ralph," Tyson said with a little smile, feeling control of the muscles of his face coming back to him. "Never lost a Voyager yet, have we?"

"Not *yet*," Yarmolinski said with a sly grin. Yarmolinski was such a notorious pessimist that it had become a standing Project joke, even to Yarmolinski himself.

"Cheer up, Ralph," Tyson said. "There's always a first time. We'll have a disaster for you yet."

Now Tyson felt himself regaining full control of his body. He sat up shakily on the couch and dangled his legs over the edge, wiggling his feet experimentally.

"What was it like this time?" Yarmolinski asked, turning on the tape recorder.

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"Pretty simple one," Tyson said. "Red clouds, yellow desert, black cliffs. No vegetation, no life of any kind. . . ."

"Sounds like it might be the same Place Jack went to on his last Voyage, though of course, there's no way to be sure. . . ."

"Ralph . . . ?"

"What's the matter, Burt?" Yarmolinski, seeing the sudden shadow cross Tyson's face.

"*It* was there again," Tyson said softly.

"Did you see anything?"

"No."

"Hear anything?"

"You never hear anything."

"Smell it? Taste it? Feel it?"

"No!" Tyson snapped. "Hell, Ralph, it was just *there*. You have to be a Voyager yourself to understand. It was just there. There was me, and there was the Place, and there was *something* that was neither part of me nor part of the Place. That's all I can tell you about it because that's all I know."

"Have any ideas what it might be?"

"Hell man, we don't even know what the Places are! Planets? Other dimensions? Other times? So how can anyone even guess at what *it* might be?"

"Take it easy, Burt. After all, you know you're always jumpy afterwards. It's just one of the side effects."

"Not this time, Ralph. Look, I've been on what, thirty-six Voyages now. Thirty-two of 'em have been normal Voyages—if you can use such an idiotic word to describe a Voyage—but four times out of thirty-six, I've run into this *something*. Maybe not the same something each time, but anyway the same *kind* of something. It's *not* just nerves. When I'm there, I feel that finding that something is the most important part of the Voyage, and yet somehow, I can't bring myself to. . . ."

"You're afraid of it, aren't you?" Yarmolinski said evenly.

Tyson sighed. "Give me a cigarette, will you?" he said. Yarmolinski handed him a cigarette and lit it for him. Tyson took a quick puff and exhaled it through his nose.

"Yeah, Ralph," he said, "I'm afraid of it. I don't know why, but I am."

"I've got a theory," Yarmolinski said. "Want to hear it?"

"Go ahead, Ralph."

"Okay. Let's assume that the Places have no objective existence. No one has really been able to prove otherwise. The Psychion-36 makes hidden segments of the Voyager's own subconsciousness accessible to him. The Voyager 'visits' his own mind. Well, then the *something* might very well be something in your subconsciousness that you are afraid to face. Every human being has things like that in his subconscious mind. It would explain the fear. It would explain why the fear grows more

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intense the closer you get to it—there's a very similar effect in psychoanalysis. The closer a patient gets to the core of his neurosis, the more he fears it and the harder it becomes to approach."

"Very pretty," Tyson said. "The only thing wrong is your basic assumption—that the Places are figments of Voyagers' minds. I'm not saying the Places exist, in the same way that this couch, or the Earth exist, but they *can't* just be personal hallucinations. If they were, how do you explain that different Voyagers seem to have visited the same Places?"

"*Seem* is the word, Burt. Since there's no way for Voyagers to objectively record what they see, we can't be *positive* that any two Voyagers have experienced the same Place."

"You're entitled to your theory, Ralph," Tyson said, "and I'm entitled to mine. Maybe the something is another Voyager. . . ?"

"Impossible! There are only seventeen Voyagers in the Project, and we *never* put more than one under at the same time."

"Sure," said Tyson, "but what if the Places are in *another* time? What if they're all in the *same* time? Then two Voyagers, even though they were put under at different times here, *could* meet in the same Place, would *have to* meet if they voyaged to the same place. . . ."

"Sounds kind of far-fetched," Yarmolinski said, "but it is just as logical as my idea. But then why the fear?"

"Maybe because we just don't *know* that it's another Voyager. All we sense is that there's something alien around, alien to the Place, and because we don't expect another Voyager, alien to us as well."

"Seems to me," Yarmolinski said, "that you're making assumptions about the Places as questionable as mine. It all seems to depend on what the Places really are, and that, no one knows."

"Well," Tyson sighed tiredly, "that's what Project Voyage is about in the first place, now isn't it?"

Just what is Project Voyage really all about. . . . ? Burt Tyson thought as he washed his fatigue away in the near-boiling shower.

The trouble seemed to be that the Project just grew; it had no real goal, unless you could call Voyaging itself a goal. The real goal, Tyson thought, should be to find out exactly what Voyaging was, what the Places were, but no one even knew how to go about asking those questions.

All that anyone really knew about Voyaging was how to do it . . .

Voyaging had been discovered by sheer chance. Psychion-36 was one of dozens of still enigmatic so-

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called "consciousness-expanding" drugs developed in the late sixties and early seventies. People who took Psychion-36 experienced hallucinations, as they did under many similar drugs. But Psychion-36 hallucinations were like no others. They were Voyages.

They traversed a short period of blackout to awake as disembodied egos in the Places. While their bodies lay in inert trances lasting for about an hour, their minds wandered through fantastic landscapes. And what was different about these hallucinations, what had made Project Voyage imperative, was that, although no one Voyager had yet visited the same Place twice, there was strong evidence that different Voyagers had been to the same Places.

Tyson rinsed himself with warm water and turned the cold tap on full blast for a minute or so. He was beginning to feel more like himself. Voyaging always took a lot out of him.

Trouble is, he thought as he dried himself, there's no common ground between the Places and reality, no point of tangency, no way to relate the two levels of existence. The Places might be anywhere, any dimension, any time. . . . or sheer hallucination. . . . .

Everyone in the Project had a minimum of one pet theory. The only thing the theories had in common was that none of them could be proved or disproved.

And now there was a . . . *something,* or a class of similar somethings that were appearing in the same Places with Voyagers with greater and greater frequency. First on only one-in-thirty Voyages, then one in twenty, one in ten. . . . It was as if there was some weird kind of kinship drawing Voyagers and . . . *somethings* together, as if the unknown mechanism in the human mind that chose the Place for any given Voyage was acquiring a bias for Places where the somethings lurked, where the somethings lurked and filled the Voyagers with a nameless fear. . . .

"You sure you want to Voyage again so soon?" Yarmolinski said again, as Tyson settled himself on the foam-rubber couch.

"I feel fine, Ralph," Tyson replied, "and I want to find *it.* I have a feeling that I'll meet it again. . . . And I somehow sense that those somethings, whatever they are, are more important than the Places, or Voyaging itself. I've got to find out what they are."

"I hope you're not going in over your head, Burt," Yarmolinski said. "What happens if you *do* make contact with it? What if it's dangerous?"

"For crying out loud!" Tyson laughed. "How in blazes can it really be dangerous? My body is right here the whole time, under your mother-hen care. How can

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anything harm me in any of the Places when I'm not really there?"

"Who knows?"

"Stop it Ralph, or you'll have me acting as paranoid as you do. Let's get on with it."

Yarmolinski shrugged, swabbed Tyson's arm with alcohol, and injected the Psychion-36 into the vein in the pit of Tyson's elbow.

Tyson closed his eyes. He felt the feeling retreating from his toes and fingers . . . his legs and arms . . . his pelvis . . . his chest . . . his neck. . .

He was a disembodied mind, a *sightless, soundless, sensationless* point of view floating in a sea of nothingness. . . .

The Voyage began.

The blackness became blacker than black. The soundlessness roared in his non-existent ears. There was a feeling of swift motion in all directions at once. . . .

Then, quite suddenly, the darkness dissolved. He was in a Place.

It was a Place of gently rolling green hills and valleys stretching to the horizon in all directions. The sky was a strikingly Earthlike blue, but there were three suns in it, blue, yellow, red.

Tyson moved his point of view closer to the ground, like a man bending. Although he had no body, his point of view was limited to what his corporeal body could do. He could not fly above obstacles any more than he could on Earth. Moving about in the Places was, in a sense, much like walking—your conscious mind willed you in a certain direction, and mechanisms which you were but dimly aware of translated, in some unknown manner, will into act. Somehow, in the Places, the mind translated what would ordinarily be a desire to walk or run or bend into an equivalent displacement of point of view.

Now Tyson could see that the green of the rolling countryside was not that of grass. The ground was covered, every square inch of it as far as he could see, with a *luxuriant coat of green moss less* than a half-inch thick.

Tyson went up gentle hills, down into little valleys. This was certainly one of the more monotonous of the Places, nothing but moss and sky, sky and moss. . . .

As Tyson shifted his point of view aimlessly about, he noticed that there seemed to be black spots scattered at very wide intervals on the mossy plain. He willed himself over to the nearest one.

It was a hole. It was a perfectly circular hole perhaps twenty feet in diameter. It seemed to have no bottom, at least not as far as Tyson could tell. Had he a body, and had he something to drop, he might've tested the hole's depth, but he had neither.

This sure is a strange one . . . Tyson thought. Almost like some weird pool table. Green moss and holes. . . .

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But then, all Places had their own brand of weirdness. Each was an adventure. That was the lure of Voyaging. . . .

Aimlessly, Tyson moved on. There was not very much to explore in this Place. Everything was all the same. . . . Perhaps over the horizon. . . ?

Tyson passed close by another hole.

Suddenly a gibbering dread filled his mind. *It* was there. In the black depths of the hole a something lurked. *The* something.

Tyson fought with his own mind as it demanded: escape! escape! This was as close as he had ever been to it, as close, so far as he knew, as any Voyager had been. . . .

The fear he felt was shattering, total, unbearable. Tyson screamed silently in the depths of his mind. He screamed and screamed and screamed, but this time he was determined to stand his ground.

He forced himself to the edge of the yawning hole, at the bottom of which *it* waited. He looked down, down into the blackness. He saw nothing, but the horrible, objectless dread tore irresistably at his will.

Tyson flinched back. Then he forced himself forward. Again the fear slammed him back.

Again he pressed forward, fighting a battle with madness in his own mind. He had to face it, he *had* to.

Slowly, haltingly, agonizingly, he felt *it* begin to rise up out of the depths of the pit.

Alien, terrible, he felt it rise. The entire Place seemed flooded with primal dread. It was too much; no man could face *this*.

Tyson fled. He fled over the mossy hills, down the green valleys. Mindlessly, panic-stricken, the ego that was Burt Tyson fled.

It followed.

He could feel the something pursuing. He could feel the alienness clawing at his mind. He could feel a half-formed desire emanating from it. Something vague, almost pleading, yet totally fearful. Tyson fled.

A tiny lost portion of his mind remembered Tyson's resolve, wanted to stop, to turn, to face that which followed. . . . But the fear was too much, the resolve seemed something far, far away and long centuries ago. Tyson fled, he willed his ego over hills, down valleys, as fast as a man could run. He wished forlornly that the unguessable laws of Voyaging did not limit his speed to human capabilities, but it was in vain. Even the fatigue of running was beginning to overcome him, completing the Earthly illusion.

No! No! No! Tyson screamed in his mind.

It was gaining. What would happen if it caught him? What nameless horrors could it inflict, what terrible death. . . ?

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Tyson tried to tell himself that his body was safe in the Voyage Room with Yarmolinski. But he could not make himself believe that there had ever been anywhere but the Place, the green moss, the hills and valleys, the holes, and *it* gaining on him, *always gaining.*

Then, finally, the green moss began to blur. The hills grew misty. The suns began to flicker, to gutter and go out. . . .

The Voyage was finally ending. With only moments to spare, with *it* almost upon him, the Voyage was finally ending. . . .

Thank you! Tyson thought, as he felt the blackness enveloping him. Oh, thank you . . . thank you . . . thank you. . . .

"Thank you! Thank you!" Tyson screamed.

"Burt! Burt! Calm down. It's over. It's me, Ralph." Yarmolinski shook Tyson's trembling body. Tyson opened his eyes. They were wild with terror.

"Take it easy, Burt, take it easy. . . ." Yarmolinski soothed. He lit a cigarette and pressed it between Tyson's trembling lips.

"Ralph . . . Ralph. . . ." Tyson took long, hurried drags on the cigarette.

"You okay now?" Yarmolinski finally said.

"Yeah," Tyson grunted. "I'm all right now . . . Lord. . . ."

"What happened?"

"There was an—*it* there again, Ralph. This time, it almost . . . caught me. It was nearly on top of me when the Voyage ended."

"Burt," Yarmolinski said softly. "You think maybe you've had it? You've been on thirty-seven Voyages now, more than anyone else. You've run into this thing five times, also more than any other Voyager. Maybe there's some kind of limit to how many Voyages a man can stand. Maybe you've reached your limit."

Tyson stared silently at the ceiling for long moments, watching the cigarette smoke curl lazily upwards.

"No Ralph," he finally said. "No! We've got to find out what this thing is. We can't keep running from it. *I* can't keep running. Sooner or later, someone has to face it and find out."

"Why you?"

"Because I've run into it more than any other Voyager. You said so yourself. Now I've had it happen twice in a row. I think that I must be somehow becoming a magnet for it . . . or vice versa, or maybe both. Maybe it has something to do with my brainwave pattern, or maybe it's just because I've had more Voyages than any one else. Whatever the reason, I think that I'll run into it almost every time out now. Someone has to stand and face it, and since I'm the most likely Voyager to run into it on any given Voyage, it might as well be me."

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"But what happens if you *do* face it?" Yarmolinski asked.

"I don't know . . ." Tyson said. "I just don't know. And *that's* what I have to find out, I guess."

"You know what curiosity did to the cat."

"Good old cheerful Ralph," Tyson laughed shortly. "Makes me feel better already, knowing that at least you're your old optimistic self. Talking about curiosity, I almost get the feeling that it's curious about *us*. If only I had stood my ground. If only I weren't so damned afraid. . . ."

"But you *were* afraid, Burt. Maybe you had good cause. What if the Voyage hadn't ended when it did?"

"What if—?" Tyson shuddered. If the Voyage hadn't ended, *it* would've caught up with him. It had been gaining. Another few minutes in the Place, and . . .

That was it!

"What's on your mind, Burt?"

Tyson exhaled a great puff of smoke. "I've got an idea, Ralph . . ." he said slowly. "It scares the hell out of me, but I'm sure it would work. If I can bring myself to do it. . . . If I've got that much guts."

"Want to tell me, Burt?"

"Not yet," said Tyson. "Schedule me for another Voyage tomorrow. I'll tell you then, if I still want to go through with it. Otherwise . . . well, it's not the sort of thing one man has the right to suggest to another."

"You're absolutely sure you want to go through with this?" Yarmolinski said, as he swabbed Tyson's arm with alcohol. "Remember, there'll be no way to change your mind."

"I'm sure," Tyson said grimly. "It's the only way. I've got to be *forced* to face it. I'll never be able to do it otherwise. So, an hour after the Voyage begins, you give me a second shot of Psychion-36. Double the time of the Voyage. If we'd have done it last time, it would've caught up with me, and . . ."

"And what? That's just it, Burt, we don't know—"

"*Please, Ralph!* That's the whole point. We don't know what the Places are, and we don't know what *it* is. This is the only way to find out. Get on with it!"

Yarmolinski shrugged. "It's your funeral," he said, as he injected the first shot of Psychion-36 into Tyson's arm.

Tyson felt the familiar numbness inching towards his head from his extremities. There seemed to be a numbness in his mind as well, the numbness of fear, the fear of fear itself . . .

He closed his eyes, trying to purge himself of fear, letting his mind plunge into the growing, deepening blackness, the endless, swirling sensationless chaos. . . .

There was the familiar moment

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of unguessable motion, and the Voyage began.

The Place was a great, high-walled crater of smooth, black volcanic glass. Tyson found his ego in the middle of the crater, the rim wall stretching up high and smooth and shiny-black all around him. A great yellow sun blazed overhead, yet the sky was dead, space-black. If such criteria applied to the Places, this one must be airless.

This was the most desolate Place he had yet seen. Black, featureless volcanic glass, black sky, harsh sun. A Place without pity. A Place without refuge.

Grimly, without bothering to explore the Place at all, Tyson waited. He waited for *it*. He waited under the cold black sky, the harsh yellow light. He waited, alone, fearful. He waited. . . .

Then all at once, he felt *its* presence. He felt the fear, the nameless, reasonless dread. It was in the crater with him, transparent to all senses, but unmistakably *there*.

The fear was terrible, demanding, unfaceable. He wavered for a moment, a small portion of his mind trying to convince the rest of him that there was nothing to be afraid of, that he could not die here, in the unreality of a Place, that his body was safe back in the Voyage Room under the watchful care of Ralph Yarmolinski. . . .

But the rational being that had made the decision to face *it* was long ago and far away, flayed into panic by bottomless terror. Tyson fled. He fled to the far wall of the crater. Madly, senselessly, forgetting the immutable laws of the Places which forbade to his detached ego any motion impossible to his body, he tried to force himself into the air and up over the sheer crater wall. But, of course, it was futile. The unbreakable illusion of *bodyness,* which had been a link with sanity on previous Voyages, now was the final piece of an inescapable trap.

He felt *it* approaching. There was nothing to be seen, but he sensed it approaching, in a curiously jerky, hesitant manner.

He fled around the base of the crater wall. It hesitated, then followed. Round and round, Tyson whirled, circling the base of the smooth crater wall as if caught on some mad monstrous merry-go-round.

Wait . . . wait . . . something seemed to wail shrilly in his mind, in between waves of visceral fear.

Tyson dully tried to marshal his courage, to turn and face the *thing*, which now almost seemed to be pleading: *wait . . . wait. . . .* But it was no use. No degree of curiosity could overcome the senseless terror.

Tyson fled. The gleaming black wall of the crater became a dazzling blur as he whirled mindless-

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ly around it, as the *something* gained slowly but inexorably on him, as waves of fear breached his mind.

Round and round for an eternity . . . and it was almost upon him now. Another few moments, and . . .

Then the crater began to dissolve, to grow vague, to flicker.

The drug was wearing off! The Voyage was ending!

Tyson gibbered with relief. In a moment, the Voyage would be over. He would be back, safe in the Voyage Room . . . but there seemed to be something he had forgotten. . . .

Suddenly, he remembered. The second shot of Psychion-36! Yarmolinski was going to give him another shot!

The flickering stopped. Once again, the volcanic glass of the crater was cold and hard and terribly substantial. Yarmolinski had given him the second shot. The Voyage would last another hour.

He was trapped. Irrevocably trapped.

And *it* was almost upon him.

I'm trapped! Tyson thought. There's no way out . . . no place to hide . . . no escape. . . . Well, if this must be it, he told himself savagely, at least let me face it like a man, not a whining dog!

He stopped. Tremendous tides of fear roiled his being as he felt it approach.

Then *it* hesitated. It stopped. It retreated. It began to move forward again, and once more hesitated. Again it retreated.

The fear became more intense, overwhelming.

Then Tyson suddenly understood. It was not his fear alone that he was feeling.

It was afraid of him, too.

It was radiating fear as he must be. The two of them were feeding each other's terror.

Of course! Tyson thought. I'm as alien to it as it is to me!

Tyson felt a sudden pang of empathy for the something, whatever it was, that was transparent to all his normal senses. Whatever, it is, he thought, I'm scaring it as much as it's scaring me.

As if in response, the atmosphere of terror seemed to wane.

Before he could change his mind, purposely leaving himself no room for second thoughts, Tyson rushed forward to meet it.

He saw nothing, heard nothing, felt nothing, but there was a soundless scream that was both his and its.

And there, in a Place that might or might not be real, the two disembodied minds that were Tyson and the stranger occupied the same locus and merged.

Who? Who? Who? a thing screeched in his mind, a thing alive with strangeness and fear.

Me! Me! Me! Tyson thought back in panic and revulsion.

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Who? Who? Who? Who are you? Who are you? What are you? What are you?

The alienness was like a reptile stench in his mind. . . . But he fought his instinctive dread. It must be as bad for the thing as for himself.

Voyager! he thought at it. Voyager! From another . . . time? place? dimension? reality? Who are you?

Yes, thought the stranger, not calmer, but still unalterably alien. *Yes . . . Voyager . . . traveler . . . explorer into the unknown. . . . I too am . . . Voyager . . . traveler . . . explorer. Why do you fear me? I mean you no harm.*

Why do *you* fear me? Tyson thought back, almost mirthfully.

I do not know. I do not know. Perhaps because I feel your fear.

That is why *I* fear you, Tyson thought. Then, suddenly, impulsively: We are fellow . . . Voyagers, explorers, adventurers. . . . We should not fear each other.

No, thought the stranger, calmer, almost wistfully, *we should not fear each other.*

You are a stranger here too? Tyson thought. This is not your world?

No. Not my world. Perhaps not even my Galaxy. Perhaps not even my universe.

Not mine either, thought Tyson, with a growing sense of sympathy for the alien. I have been to many such Places.

I too.

What are the Places? Tyson asked hopefully. Do you know?

No. Do you?

No, thought Tyson. We do not know. Some of us have thought that they might simply be hallucinations of our own minds, but now that we have met, that obviously cannot be.

Some of us thought the same, replied the alien. *Not those of us who are Travelers, though. Perhaps the Places are in another universe, another time. . . . We visit them through the medium of a drug. We do not know how it works.*

Nor do we, Tyson thought. The Places are a mystery.

Yes.

The Places are not of your universe?

How can we know? Perhaps they are planets orbiting other suns in our own Galaxy. We cannot know, for we have not yet visited other suns with our bodies.

Nor have we, Tyson answered. Perhaps . . . perhaps, he thought, with growing excitement, perhaps we live in the same Galaxy!

Perhaps, answered the alien. *I would like to think so. But how can we know? All we know is that our two races have met, here in this Place that is alien to both of us, here where both of us are minds without bodies, in a place that may not even exist. But we have met. Our minds have contacted*

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each other, though our bodies are still chained to our planets.

I am glad that we have met, Tyson thought. Our peoples can be friends.

Yes, answered the alien, *friends. Friends against the unknown.*

Perhaps, thought Tyson, feeling a strange new emotion that was both fear and hope, perhaps our peoples will meet someday, when we both go to the stars. Perhaps someday we will stand on the ground of each other's planets.

Perhaps, replied the alien. *Perhaps, if we live in the same universe.* Then, somehow sadly, filled with loss; *But how can we ever know?*

The Places! Tyson thought. Our peoples have passed each other before in the Places, like fearful animals in the dark. But now there need be no more fear. We will meet again . . . in the Places, whether they are real or not. The Places will be our meeting ground, until someday, perhaps, our ships meet each other in our own universe. . . .

Yes, thought the stranger, no longer quite an alien, *in the Places. In the Places where we are both aliens, we will have a meeting ground. We will meet again.*

Perhaps, together, some day, we will learn what the Places really are, Tyson thought.

Yes, thought the stranger, his mind seeming to grow faint and dim in Tyson's, *yes, together. It is a good thought. This Place is fading now. The drug is wearing off. I am returning to my own world. Goodby . . . goodby . . . goodby till we meet again . . . in the Places . . . goodby . . . goodby. . . .*

Goodby, Tyson thought. Goodby, fellow Voyager.

The stranger was gone. Once more, Tyson was alone in the Place, waiting for the Psychion-36 to wear off, waiting to return to an Earth that would no longer be quite the same.

He was alone, but not in the same sense as he had been before. Somewhere, sometime, in some universe, there were other intelligent beings, beings that could be as much friends as aliens.

In this Place, in this enigmatic reality that might or might not be real, two races had contacted each other for the first time, a contact so tenuous, so tentative, that all each had learned was that the other existed. It was not very much.

But it was a beginning.

[Cairo, Egypt. It is on the Nile and has a population of 3,346,000. (See *Science.*)]

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SCIENCE

OLD MAN RIVER

by Isaac Asimov

A COUPLE OF WEEKS AGO (AS I WRITE), I HAD A LUNCHEON DATE with an editor in order to discuss a possible new book, and we decided to meet at a restaurant at 12:15 P.M. The editor, I might say, was a young lady, for that is not irrelevant to the story.

I must admit, now, that I have a fault that is also not irrelevant to the story. Although nearly perfect in almost every other respect, I do have a tendency to be early to appointments. This means I frequently have to wait, something to which I am completely hardened, and which doesn't bother me. However, when the other party arrives (usually late) there seems to be something about my frank and friendly countenance that indicates I have been waiting a long time and this produces flustered explanations which I dismiss genially.

In this case, I arrived at 12:10 and was shown to a seat. The young lady in question arrived at 12:17 and bore down upon me, explaining as she came.

Naturally, I couldn't allow this. In the first place she was only two minutes late; in the second place, I had only been waiting seven minutes, hardly anything compared to what I am accustomed to; and in the third place, she was a young lady.

So I rose as she reached the table and said in my normal speaking voice (which has a tendency to rattle the distant windows), "Not at all, darling! I've been spending a delightful few minutes here, dreaming of you, and anticipating the ecstasy of your approaching presence!"

—You know, just the usual sort of thing writers are always saying to editors.

A passing waiter stopped in his tracks as I said this, rather as if he had been pole-axed. He turned toward me and stared in growing un-

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certainty at my sunny blue eyes and my high Slavic cheekbones. Finally, he said (with a distinct Italian accent), "Pardon me, sir, but can you possibly be Italian?"

What could I do? Could I hurt his supreme faith in the gallantry of the Italian male? So I said, "Yes, indeed—but only with the ladies."

And he left, thoroughly content.

But it made me think of the manner in which I always try to evade the stereotype. This goes (knock wood) for my writing as well, which gives no clear indication as to what I "specialize" in. My most recent book, for instance, is entitled THE ROMAN REPUBLIC and it is a straight history book.

Naturally, I am sure to be asked, "But what do *you* know about history?"

To which I intend to answer, with a gentle smile, "As little as I know about science."

That should not only content the questioners but give them the (mistaken) notion that I have just exhibited a charming modesty.

Of course, one of the reasons I have been able to avoid being pigeonholed as a this or a that* is this particular series of monthly articles. Since I am given carte blanche as far as subject matter is concerned, I can experiment, and pamper my interests in whatever direction.

For instance, I have written a number of quasi-geographic articles recently and since I now want to write another one, I intend to do so.

What sparked the immediate interest was my receipt of a new atlas, THE ODYSSEY WORLD ATLAS published by Odyssey Books. It is large, spectacular, and crowded with information, and while I was turning the pages with intense pleasure, I came across a list of rivers. It struck me at once (as it has struck me often before) that the longest river in North America has no name.

The river in question was "discovered" by the Spanish explorer, Hernando De Soto in 1541. I put "discovered" in quotation marks because to neglect them would be an exercise in racism. De Doto was the first *European* to see the river, but non-Europeans had discovered it many thousands of years before. It's like the controversy of who *really* discovered America, Christopher Columbus, Lief Ericsson, or St. Brendan—when all along the real discoverer was some nameless Indian.

The Indians who lived on the river banks at the spot reached by De Soto, called it "Big River" with admirable straightforwardness. Of

When the question is put to me bluntly, I answer, "Well, in theory, *I'm a biochemist."*

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course, they called it that in their own language so that it was "Mici Sepe" or something like that. And this became, to Americans and to the world, "Mississippi."

The Mississippi River was taken to be the stream that flowed from Lake Itasca in northern Minnesota, in a generally southward direction, down to the Gulf of Mexico, a length of 2,350 miles. In 1783, the western boundary of the United States was established along almost the entire length of this river (the final hundred miles at the mouth remained in the hands of, first Spain, and then France, for twenty years more). The name, as applied to that particular stretch of flowing water was therefore frozen into American consciousness past all eradication.

Just a few miles north of the city of St. Louis, another river flows into the Mississippi. There is a three mile stretch of the Mississippi, right in that neighborhood, that runs due north and south with scarcely a wiggle, and the other river comes straight into it from the west at nearly a right angle. This incoming river is called the Missouri River from the name given themselves by an Indian tribe that lived on its banks.

Now, psychologically, one pictures a river as moving straight ahead with a tributary coming in at right angles. Consequently, it seemed only natural to think of the Missouri as a tributary of the Mississippi. This was especially so since the Mississippi was a long, long river, known from source to mouth, whereas the Missouri trickled off into the western wilderness somewhere and, for all anyone knew, might conceivably be only a few hundred miles long.

In 1803, however, the United States bought the Louisiana Territory from France (which had no legal right to sell, but its too late now). Since the Territory included, in theory, the entire drainage area of the western tributaries of the Mississippi, there was importance in determining just where those tributaries went.

In an exploring expedition lasting from 1804 to 1806, Meriweather Lewis and William Clark traced the Missouri River back to its source in what is now southwestern Montana. As it turns out, the Missouri River, following it backward through its longest tributaries, is 2,466 miles in length, which makes it a trifle longer than the Mississippi.

But let us now go back to the confluence of the Mississippi and the Missouri just north of St. Louis. When two rivers come together, which is the river and which the tributary? If we want to be logical, we ought to say that the longer of the two joining streams is the river and the shorter is the tributary.

In that case, we have at St. Louis, first, the Missouri, which is 2,466

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miles long and second, the length of the Mississippi above St. Louis (the Upper Mississippi River) which is only 1,050 miles long. Clearly the Missouri is the river and the Upper Mississippi the tributary.

Imagine a drop of water trickling down the northern slopes of the mountain ridge making up the boundary between the states of Montana and Idaho. It joins something called the Red Rock Creek, which eventually becomes the Missouri River. It is carried through Montana and the Dakotas, along the boundaries between Nebraska and Iowa, into the state of Missouri, joins what we call the Mississippi at St. Louis, flows southward past Memphis, Vicksburg, and New Orleans into the Gulf of Mexico.

From the Montana mountains to the sea, that drop of water has travelled 3,760 miles along a single unbroken river, and what is the name of that single unbroken river? It has none! Part of it is called the Missouri and part of it the Mississippi, but the whole of it has no single name. The best we can do is call it the Missouri-Mississippi which is clumsy and sounds artificial.

The Missouri-Mississippi, though the longest river in North America and the "Old Man River" of the song, is not the longest river in the world. There are two rivers that are longer.

In fact, let's make a table of the "Great Rivers" of the world, using as our criterion for greatness the thoroughly artificial one of a length of a thousand miles or more. Naturally, the figures on length are only approximate in some cases, but here goes:

Great River	*Continent*	*Outflow*	*Length (miles)*
Nile	Africa	Mediterranean Sea	4,160
Amazon	South America	Atlantic Ocean	3,900
Missouri-Mississippi	North America	Gulf of Mexico	3,760
Ch'ang (Yangtze)	Asia	East China Sea	3,370
Hwang-Ho	Asia	Yellow Sea	2,870
Congo	Africa	Atlantic Ocean	2,720
Amur	Asia	Sea of Okhotsk	2,700
Lena	Asia	Arctic Ocean	2,660
Peace-Mackenzie	North America	Arctic Ocean	2,640
Mekong	Asia	South China Sea	2,600
Niger	Africa	Gulf of Guinea	2,600
Parana	South America	Rio de la Plata	2,580
Ob	Asia	Arctic Ocean	2,500

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Great River	*Continent*	*Outflow*	*Length (miles)*
Yenesei	Asia	Arctic Ocean	2,410
Murray	Australia	Great Australian Bight	2,310
Volga	Europe	Caspian Sea	2,290
Madeira	South America	Amazon River	2,100
Yukon	North America	Bering Sea	2,000
Purus	South America	Amazon River	1,950
St. Lawrence	North America	Gulf of St. Lawrence	1,900
Rio Grande	North America	Gulf of Mexico	1,890
Irtysh	Asia	Ob River	1,840
Syr Darya	Asia	Lake Aral	1,810
Brahmaputra	Asia	Bay of Bengal	1,800
Indus	Asia	Arabian Sea	1,800
Sao Francisco	South America	Atlantic Ocean	1,800
Danube	Europe	Black Sea	1,750
Japura	South America	Amazon River	1,750
Darling	Australia	Murray River	1,725
Euphrates	Asia	Persian Gulf	1,710
Tocantins	South America	Amazon River	1,670
Zambezi	Africa	Mozambique Channel	1,630
Saskatchewan-Nelson	North America	Hudson Bay	1,600
Orinoco	South America	Atlantic Ocean	1,600
Salween	Asia	Andaman Sea	1,600
Ural	Asia-Europe	Caspian Sea	1,570
Amu Darya	Asia	Lake Aral	1,550
Ganges	Asia	Brahmaputra River	1,550
Paraguay	South America	Parana River	1,530
Arkansas	North America	Missouri-Mississippi R.	1,450
Colorado	North America	Gulf of California	1,450
Dnieper	Europe	Black Sea	1,420
Negro	South America	Amazon River	1,400
Si-Kiang	Asia	South China Sea	1,380
Angara	Asia	Yenesei River	1,300
Allegheny-Ohio	North America	Missouri-Mississippi R.	1,300
Irrawaddy	Asia	Andaman Sea	1,300
Orange	Africa	Atlantic Ocean	1,300
Pilcomayo	South America	Paraguay River	1,300
Columbia	North America	Pacific Ocean	1,210
Don	Europe	Sea of Azov	1,210
Sungari	Asia	Amur River	1,170

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Great River	*Continent*	*Outflow*	*Length (miles)*
Tigris	Asia	Persian Gulf	1,160
Upper Mississippi	North America	Missouri-Mississippi R.	1,050
Snake	North America	Columbia River	1,040
Red	North America	Missouri-Mississippi R.	1,020
Churchill	North America	Hudson Bay	1,000
Uruguay	South America	Rio de la Plata	1,000

There are thus 58 Great Rivers on the Earth, which may be divided up among the continents as follows:

Asia	21
North America	14
South America	12
Africa	5
Europe	5
Australia	2

The total here comes to 59 because the Ural River forms the entirely artificial boundary between Europe and Asia and is counted to both.

We might say that among the Great Rivers are four "Super-rivers" with lengths of more than 3000 miles, distributed, neatly enough, one to a continent. Africa boasts the Nile, South America the Amazon, North America the Missouri-Mississippi, and Asia the Ch'ang (better known to me, at least, as the Yangtse).

And yet this is an illusion. Judging by every criterion *but* length, there is only one Super-river. Suppose, for instance, that we consider the area of land drained by a river and its tributaries. The Ch'ang (Yangtse) drains something less than a million square miles, while the Nile and the Missouri-Mississippi drain something more than a million. None of the three are in first place. None of them are even in second place.

Judging by the size of the drainage area, the Congo River, which is only in sixth place in length, and is distinctly below the 3,000 mile mark, does much better than the stretched-out Nile. It has a drainage area of 1,600,000 square miles.

And at that, the Congo is only in second place. Surpassing it easily is the Amazon which, with its tributaries, drains about 2,700,000

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square miles. The discrepancy becomes even greater if we compare drainage areas to the total continental area. After all, a South American river has less potential area to drain than an Asian river has, simply because South America is the smaller continent. If we do this, the results look as follows:

River	*Continent*	*Fraction of Continent Drained*
Ch'ang (Yangtze)	Asia	0.05
Nile	Africa	0.09
Missouri-Mississippi	North America	0.13
Congo	Africa	0.14
Amazon	South America	0.40

In this respect, the Amazon is incomparable.

We can conclude precisely the same thing if we consider the volume of water delivered by the rivers. The Nile, despite its great length, flows through the desert for a thousand miles and loses much water by evaporation. It delivers a comparatively small volume to the sea, therefore. The Missouri-Mississippi and its tributaries discharge 675,000 cubic feet of water per second into the ocean. The Ch'ang (Yangtze) does rather better with a mark of 770,000 and the Congo does still better with 1,200,000 cubic feet per second. However, the Congo is only second best. I cannot find the precise figures for the Amazon River in my library, alas, but I remember reading once that its volume of discharge was seven times that of the second most voluminous river, which would make it some 8,000,000 cubic feet per second.

Let's see if we can't do something for the Amazon River in terms of length as well.

The Great Rivers, if we look at the table, fall into two classes. There are, first, main rivers that flow into oceans, gulfs, bays or inland seas. Then there are tributaries that flow into larger rivers. Among the Great Rivers are seventeen tributaries that are themselves Great Rivers. Let's pull them out of the list and look at them:

Tributary	*River*
Madeira	Amazon
Purus	Amazon
Irtysh	Ob
Japura	Amazon

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Darling	Murray
Tocantins	Amazon
Ganges	Brahmaputra
Paraguay	Parana
Arkansas	Missouri-Mississippi
Negro	Amazon
Angara	Yenesei
Allegheny-Ohio	Missouri-Mississippi
Pilcomayo	Paraguay
Sungari	Amur
Upper Mississippi	Missouri-Mississippi
Snake	Columbia
Red	Missouri-Mississippi

As you see, the Amazon has five tributaries that are themselves Great Rivers. In fact, of the six longest tributaries in the world, no less than four are tributaries of the Amazon. This includes the longest tributary of all, the Madeira River—the only river in the world that manages to be longer than 2,000 miles and then end up merely in another river.

No other Great River can match this. The Missouri-Mississippi has four Great River tributaries, but they are from the short half of the list whereas the Amazon's are from the long half. The Parana has two such tributaries, but those two form a unique combination. It has a Great River tributary and a Great River *sub*-tributary. The Pilcomayo flows into the Paraguay which, in turn, flows into the Parana, and all three are Great Rivers. There is no other case like that on Earth. Six other Great Rivers: Ob, Murray, Brahmaputra, Yenesei, Amur and Columbia, have one Great-River tributary apiece.

Suppose now that we add up lengths. Let us add to the length of each Great River, the length of each Great-River tributary and call the total length that of the "Great-River System." It turns out there are eight such Great-River Systems over 3,000 miles in length, and there are also two Great Rivers which have no Great-River tributaries but which are themselves over 3,000 miles long. Let's add them in and list the ten of them:

Great-River Systems	*Total Length (miles)*
Amazon	12,770
Missouri-Mississippi	8,580
Parana	5,310
Ob	4,340

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Nile	4,160
Murray	4,035
Amur	3,870
Yenesei	3,710
Ch'ang (Yangtze)	3,370
Brahmaputra	3,350

Of these ten Systems, five are in Asia, two are in South America, and one each is in North America, Africa, and Australia. The three largest, oddly enough, are in the Western Hemisphere.

But as you can see the Amazon Great-River System is far longer than any other, so that length joins volume of flow and drainage area to mark out the uniqueness of that river.

The Amazon River is *the* Old Man River; no other stream need apply. There is sober truth in saying that all the rivers in the world fall into two classes. The first includes the Amazon River. The second includes all the rest.

Now, for another point. Consider the fate of the Great Rivers; their point of outflow.

In the table of the Great Rivers, I gave the outflow as seas, gulfs, bays and so on. Actually, we can be more fundamental. Each river that reaches the open sea, either directly, or by way of the larger river into which it flows, ends up in one of the three great divisions of the ocean (see WATER, WATER, EVERYHERE . . . *F & SF,* December 1965). These are the Pacific Ocean, the Atlantic Ocean (including the Arctic Ocean) and the Indian Ocean.

If we look at it that way then the five longest Great-River Systems all flow into the Atlantic Ocean. (The longest that does not is the Murray-Darling in Australia and that, while long, is a mere trickle of a river that doesn't amount to much.)

Suppose, then, we become systematic and go back over our list of Great Rivers, counting how many of them flow into each ocean, and finding the total mileage in each case.

Ocean	*Great Rivers*	*Total Length (miles)*
Atlantic	34	66,060
Pacific	10	19,790
Indian	10	16,585

There is no question but that the Atlantic Ocean receives most of the river water in the world. Not only does it receive more Great Rivers

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with a longer total mileage than the other two oceans combined but among the rivers flowing into the Atlantic are the very largest—the Amazon and the Congo.

Notice, by the way, that there are 54 Great Rivers that drain off into the three oceans, whereas there are 58 Great Rivers altogether. There is no mystery here; the discrepancy has a simple explanation. There are four Great Rivers that never reach the ocean. Here they are:

Great River	*Outflow*
Volga	Caspian Sea
Syr Darya	Lake Aral
Ural	Caspian Sea
Amu Darya	Lake Aral

The Caspian Sea and Lake Aral are both inland seas and each receives two Great Rivers; the only inland bodies of water to do so. The Volga River thus has the distinction of being not only the longest river in Europe but also the longest river anywhere in the world that never reaches the ocean.

As it happens 3½ of these four rivers are to be found entirely within the territory of the Soviet Union. The headwaters of the Amu Darya form part of the border between the Soviet Union and Afghanistan.

Interestingly enough, these Great Rivers are rather poor in large cities. Such cities tend to cluster on the shores of lakes or oceans. When they are on rivers, the rivers are very often small. London is on the Thames River (209 miles long); Paris on the Seine (480 miles); Berlin on the Spree (220 miles); and Moscow on the Moskva (315 miles).

Consider the American Great-River system, the Missouri-Mississippi. Not one of America's million-and-over cities is to be found upon it. We have five cities with a population of over a million, and of these, one is on the Atlantic Ocean, one on the Pacific Ocean, one on Lake Michigan, and one on Lake St. Clair. The fifth is on a river but not a Great River.

The largest city on all the thousands of miles of the Missouri-Mississippi system is St. Louis and its population is only 750,000.

Can you guess, then, which is the largest city in the world to be on a Great River in an inland location? (Close your eyes and try.) Now look at the answer on page 104 and see if you're right.

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What with the established power of organized labor and the influence of various other protest movements, it may soon become difficult to isolate a reliable case of oppression. But there's always one Place where we can count on finding a vast army of downtrodden. Here, Brian Cleeve spins a fanciful tale of unionization against the blackest Boss of all, with some uncertain, but extremely funny results. Mr. Cleeve has written for British television, American magazines, and is the author of four novels. The latest, VICE ISN'T PRIVATE, *will soon be published by Random House. He is a citizen of the Irish Republic. He lives in Dublin.*

THE DEVIL AND DEMOCRACY

by Brian Cleeve

"YOUR LOWNESS IS ALWAYS Left," said Belphagor, absent-mindedly taking the needle-sharp little soul of a TV producer out of his lapel and starting to pick his fangs. "But I think you ought to see them."

"I will not," snarled the Devil. "I've been master here since before the Creation. D'you think I'm going to let this crawling little worm of a fifth-class sinner come down here and unionise Hell? I will not see them. I will not deal with them. I will not recognise them. And if that picket isn't off Hell's Gates inside ten minutes I'm going to—" and he lashed his tail so violently that he swept half a hundred weight of Kitchen Cob Souls straight out of the soul scuttle into the fire. They sputtered damply and began to smoulder with a rather nasty smell.

"I asked you for Bright Household Nuts," said the Devil in a low, dangerous voice.

Belphagor shrugged.

"That's all there is. And when they're gone—" he shrugged again. "It's going to be extremely cold." He stuck the TV producer in the corner of his mouth in a rather vulgar manner and spread out his hands in front of the smoky mass of bankers, politicians and armchair generals. "If the electricians join in—" As he said

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it the bulbs began to dim and fade in the great crystal chandeliers. The photographers' models, boutique owners, cardsharps and motorcar salesmen inside the bulbs stopped glowing white, turned dull red, faded and vanished in the general gloom. Only the fire still burned an unhealthy blue at one end of the vast throne room. "I really think you ought to see them," Belphagor said. "After all, just seeing them needn't commit you to anything. And it might get the lights back."

Three hours later they were facing the union organisers across the black basalt conference table in the Third Circle of the Executive Suite. And a nastier group, thought the Devil, he had never seen since the Fall. Imps, trolls, fiends, illiterate demons; not a decently educated devil in the whole pompous bunch. Bad breath and worse manners, picking their noses with their tails, belching and scratching and trying to look as if they were used to sitting in leather armchairs instead of squatting on red hot buckets. "Why am I doing it?" the Devil thought. "Why don't I just retire to the country and forget all this? Lilith would love it. She's been at me for centuries—"

But Belphagor was knocking on the table. "We are delighted to welcome you, gentlemen. If you have a spokesman?"

From the depths of an armchair upholstered in genuine Storm Trooper, a fat, slubberly, oily-faced imp wearing a dirty boiler suit clambered to his hind paws, and wiping the back of a thick, hairy front paw across his snout said in an atrocious accent, "Our spokesman is Brother Grunge," and sticking his paw into the pocket of his boiler suit pulled out a raucous, shouting, gesticulating little soul carrying a picket's banner in one fist and a red bandana handkerchief in the other.

"Brothers!" screamed Grunge, obviously continuing from the point where he had been stuffed into the imp's pocket a few minutes earlier, "I've been fighting the employer-class for forty-seven years, and I know them like a dog knows fleas. They're yellow, I tell you, yellow all through—"

The slubberly imp tapped Grunge on top of his head with a horny claw. "That *is* the employer." He himself had the decency to blush a dark shade of black, but Grunge was unabashed. "An exploiter if ever I saw one," he shouted. "We haven't come here to bargain. We've come here to tell you. We've got solidarity! We've got brotherhood! And we're going to stick this out till Hell freezes over. You can lock us out. You can starve us. But you'll never beat us. We're going to have justice here or you can sell this plant for a pig farm. Isn't that right, brothers? Am I speaking for us all?"

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The row of ungainly imps nodded and growled agreement.

The Devil lurched unsteadily to his feet. From the moment that Grunge had first appeared, bilious green and sweating, out of the dirty pocket of the leading imp's boiler suit, the Devil had begun to look extremely reactionary, and the effect of Grunge's opening remarks had been far from beneficial. He had begun to swell and change colour in a marked manner, and by the time the imps had signified their agreement with Grunge, the Devil looked dangerously near having a stroke.

"Tell them to go away," he whispered, clawing at the collar of his reptile green suit, which had grown extremely tight. "The meeting is over. Get me my pills."

"But you can't!" screamed the leading imp. "We have to discuss —"

"I don't," said the Devil, holding on to the gold dragon's head door handle for support.

"Fascist!" screamed Grunge. "Close the plant! Pull out the maintenance men! One for all and all for one, eh, brothers?"

The Devil felt his way out of the room, and as Belphagor followed him, Grunge began leading the imps in the first bars of the Red Flag. Five seconds later all the lights went out. Outside the Palace crowds of working-class imps were standing about in sullen idleness, staring up at the now darkened windows of the conference room. Grunge, waving his red bandana, appeared on a window sill, put there by the leader-imp. "Brothers!" screamed Grunge. "Lay down your forks! The day has come! Justice! Liberty! Freedom! Let imps and sinners stand shoulder to shoulder in the fight for democracy! The bosses have divided us! Exploited us! Told us our interests are opposed! Give them the lie brothers! Let sinner and imp clasp hands in deathless brotherhood. Let the fires go out. Unity! Equality! I proclaim the Eternal Liberty of the Imps and Sinners Soviet Republic. This isn't a strike any longer, comrades, this is War, this is Revolution, this is the March of History!"

An ugly roar of approval rose from several thousand scaly throats, counterpointed by the shrill piping of an even larger number of souls just liberated from the furnaces.

"It's the end of everything," whimpered Belphagor. "If only you'd given them the ninety-six hour week when they first asked for it—"

"Rubbish," said the Devil, who had taken three of his heart pills in a glass of blood and was both looking and feeling very much stronger. "All we need is strategy. Inside a week I'll have them begging for mercy."

They slipped out of the back door of the Palace disguised as

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scullery imps. Grunge was still shouting. Belphagor shuddered. Sinners were lolling around at their ease. Younger imps were playing hopscotch or blindman's bluff. Older imps were playing cards on top of the cooling grid-irons or lying asleep in the still warm ashes of the furnaces. Not a punishment was in progress. Not a sinner was screaming. The chute from the upper regions gaped over its empty bin. "Look," whispered Belphagor, awed by a sight that no devil had seen since Eve bit the apple. "It's empty. The top-side staff have struck as well!" A cold shiver of fear ran through his tail.

"We're going to fix Grunge," said the Devil, restraining himself with super-devilish control from kicking the nightlights out of an unwholesome looking stoker-imp who was playing three-handed stud with two souls from the Fourth Circle. "We're going to send him back. Up Top."

Belphagor stared at his Master open-mouthed. "Up Top! Back? But you can't! Why—"

The First Law of Damnation learned by every imp and juvenile devil in third grade forebade it. It was unthinkable. "What comes down can't go up." Q.E.D. Quod est Damnatum.

"Watch Me," said the Devil. "I haven't built this place down to see it taken over by a bunch of stokers. Stick close behind me and shut your snout."

They threaded their way through the crowd toward one of the lesser Gates. Already things were taking an even uglier turn. In the distance they saw a senior devil surrounded by jeering imps, who were forcing him to sing the Red Flag. On the far side of the Palace there was a sound of breaking glass as if windows were being smashed. "They'll be looting soon," whispered Belphagor. "Oughtn't we—"

"Let them," snarled the Devil. "Tomorrow is another century." They slipped out of the unguarded Gate, threw off their repulsive and humiliating disguises behind a convenient bush, and spread their wings.

"Where are we going?" Belphagor said timidly.

"Belmuck," said the Devil. "Rapesprocket's parish."

An instant later, if you calculate such things by earthly time, the Devil and his henchman landed in a small cave in the fair and wholesome parish of Belmuck. As you'll know, if you are at all versed in Infernal Theology, every Christian parish—and for all I know to the contrary, every pagan parish as well—has a Devil's Hole, through which, a moment or so after death, the souls of the unhappy damned are tipped to their eternal doom by the Resident Imp of the parish, the infernal counterpart of the parish priest. The Resident Imp of Belmuck was

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Rapesprocket, and a lazier, more unsatisfactory, more inefficient R.I. it would be hard to find in the length and breadth of Christendom. In centuries no parishioner of Belmuck had been tipped down the Hole. Even on the infamous occasion when the two O'Shaughnessys had killed each other over the widow Hegarty's cow, Rapesprocket had let them both slip out of his hands simply by being asleep at the crucial moment. Only family connections and the almost feudal conservatism of Hell had allowed Rapesprocket to retain his Care of Souls. Now, the Devil was extremely glad of it.

"Look at him," he said to Belphagor with grim satisfaction. "As usual." And indeed, Rapesprocket's condition was all too usual, disgraceful as it was. An empty poteen jar lay under his head in the guise of a pillow. Another, almost as empty, lay in the crook of his fat and hairy arm. A clay pipe drooped from the slack and rubbery lips of his sack-like mouth, and out of the black vents of his snout came the soft snores of a far too contented sleep. Rapesprocket was both drunk and incapable.

"Shall I kick his head in?" Belphagor said hopefully. The Devil restrained him.

"Not yet. Not for another twenty four hours. First we want a soul. Any one will do, so long as we get it in a nice state of mortal sin at the appropriate moment. Then we get Rapesprocket to throw it down the Hole." He was clearing away a thick tangle of cobwebs from the mouth of the Hole as he was talking. "Even Rapesprocket ought to be able to do that if we put it into his hand first."

Belphagor gaped at him. "What good will that do?"

"My dear Belphagor," said the Devil wearily, "there is a strike on at the bottom? Agreed? No souls are going down. No Resident Imp will agree to send one down because of the strike. Am I making myself clear? Except Rapesprocket, who as you see is obviously incapable of having heard of the strike, let alone joining it. Therefore, if we can induce Rapesprocket to send down a soul, this will be whitelegging? Am I going too fast for you? Down below they will refuse to process the soul, or even to receive it, and there will therefore be a discrepancy in the books between us below, and —" He coughed gently as he always did when he mentioned the Opposition—"and Them above."

Belphagor still gaped. The Devil closed his eyes, and thoroughly unpleasant sparks came out of his ears and turned into fireflies. "Someone give me patience," he murmured. "We go back down and negotiate. We agree to absolutely anything they want. And at a certain moment

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this matter of Rapesprocket's whitelegging is bound to come up. They'll demand the scab-production soul be sent back up Top. And—" he coughed gently— "the Opposition will have to agree in principle that we be permitted to send one soul back up the chute. *They* don't want to see us close down any more than we do. And when I've got that permission—" His eyes glittered ferociously, and he swelled so large that he suddenly filled the cave and bruised himself badly on a knob of rock—"then I send one soul back up the chute the very next instant. But it won't be Rapesprocket's little capture. It will be Grunge." He clicked two clawed fingers together like a pistol shot. "Let's see how long the strike lasts without *him.*"

And followed by Belphagor in an admiring silence, he set off down the hillside toward the innocently sleeping village of Belmuck.

Unfortunately for our two fiends Belmuck believed in "early to bed" if not in "early to rise", and on reaching the village the Devil found not a light lighting nor a soul stirring nor even a mouse nibbling cheese, and he and Belphagor had to occupy the next nine hours by disturbing and tormenting the sleep of any sleeper who caught their impatient and devilish fancy. Even old Concepta Hennigan, who was a hundred and six, had such dreams as startled her out of her white woolly bedsocks, and she woke up with such an appetite for breakfast and such a bright, hopeful eye as astonished her great-grand-daughter, Rose Ann McCarthy, into nearly spilling the tea on her great-grandmother's coverlet.

"Watch what you're doing, gerrul," quavered the old crone, but instead of telling her to be glad of any class of breakfast at all, even with tea in the saucer, Rose Ann simply smiled delightfully and emptied the spilled drops into the geranium pot on the window sill. "Yer'll kill me geramium!" screeched Concepta, and Rose Ann merely patted the white pillow into its proper shape behind her great-grandmother's nearly bald head, set the tray on her lap, and buttered the homemade bread for her before cutting it into little, delicious morsels for the old woman's convenience. The Devil, who was watching all this sickening display of virtuous patience in the guise of a bluebottle perched on the geranium, ground his front feelers together and obliterated a small, innocent fruit fly which got in the way.

To see virtue in daily use was bad enough, but to see it in such a toothsome shape as Rose Ann McCarthy was infinitely worse. In fact it was intolerable, and then and there, almost forgetting the

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main purpose of the visit, the Devil determined that the soul he had come for should be the soul of Rose Ann and no other. "I'll have her," he snarled, gnashing his saw-edge proboscis over the mangled remains of the fruit fly. "I'll have her inside the day." And taking off from the geranium he buzzed round her dark and luscious head like an undertaker measuring a prospective customer. Although such a customer would surely have melted the heart of any undertaker and made him regret his mournful calling.

Her hair shone like brown silk of the darkest shade, thick and curling, with the warmth of the sun and the beauty of the moon in its deepest shadows. Her teeth were like white hawthorn flowers behind the red promise of her mouth, and the blush and flush on her cheeks was like the warm down of a ripe peach. And this would be only the beginning of the short description of the heads and chapters of her beauty. The soft throat of her, with hollows under the rounded chin where a bird could nestle; the sweet breast like modesty itself under the starched and pleated linen of her blouse—for what so beautiful as modesty in a young girl?—the supple promise of her waist that would scarcely fill a man's two hands unless he squeezed them tight—and who wouldn't, unless he was a Carmelite?—all this that I'm bashful describing was merely the outermost revelations of her charm.

Let you watch her walking and guess at the hidden mechanism of her beauty, and I warrant that if you hadn't already, why then you'd fall down in the same fit of passionate attachment as had taken half the boys in the village, the the other half being freed from it only by emigration. But however passionate your attachment was, it wouldn't be likely to be half so passionate as that of Desmond Sorley Boy O'Shaughnessy, the postman's son. He had only to think of her to go into cantrips and calamities of passion, and if he got more than two glimpses of her in any one day he had to steady himself that night with enough poteen to slaughter an ox or he couldn't have slept. Indeed it was in a slightly poteen-induced sleep that the Devil had found him, and through his tortured dreams of longing and love had got wind of the apparently impregnable state of Rose Ann's virtue.

"Get rid of that nasty fly!" screeched Concepta, and obediently Rose Ann picked up a tightly rolled copy of the *Cork Examiner* kept precisely for such purposes, and caught the Devil a terrible smack on the left side of the head. Thirty seconds later, and about thirty feet from Concepta's open window, the Devil came to his senses in the middle of the road

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and narrowly avoided being obliterated by a passing donkey.

"Yerrah damn," said Belphagor in the shape of a wasp, alighting beside his master on a convenient lump of the donkey's droppings. "That was a formidable belt you got from that lassie. I'd leave her alone if I were you."

Most of what the Devil said in reply is completely unprintable, even with stars and asterisks, and all that can be safely repeated here are the last two words, "follow me," as the noisome pair flew off to meditate and scheme in the little shed behind Concepta's cottage. "Now," said the Devil, when they were comfortably settled, "I mean to have that girl if it takes me till Doomsday, or at least till this midnight, and if you're unable to assist in bringing about this simple consummation, I suggest that you don't bother to return below with Me, because if you do, by the red hot horns of my Throne I'll make you wish you'd stayed bleating and harping with the—ahem—Opposition."

Belphagor polished his sting on the wooden seat in a rebellious manner, and eyed his Master with something close to exasperation. "Why do you always want things the difficult way? Why not the old woman? Why not Shoneen James, the publican down the road? I've been watching him water the whiskey. He'd be a pushover."

"It's Rose Ann I want," buzzed the Devil, "and Rose Ann I'll have. And I think I know how. Come back out to the road." And back they flew, and a mile out of the village, where down a quiet boreen they transformed themselves in less than an instant into two of the sleekest, most persuasive travelling salesmen that had ever travelled the quiet roads of West Cork. And if you don't know the district, then you must merely accept my word for it that that's saying a great deal. Belphagor wore a camel's hair overcoat in spite of the warm June weather, and a green velours hat with a narrow, curly brim, and a pink bow tie with chocolate stripes, and a shirt to match, and a pearl cuff link just peeping out of the sleeve of his tasteful green suit. A pair of pink fluorescent socks and dark blue suede shoes completed the genteel ensemble.

But if Belphagor knocked the eye out of the day with his tasteful splendour, the Devil put it back again. A pale yellow suit with the faintest white checks in it would have made any onlooker realise at once that whatever else He was, He was a gentleman, by the sheer masterful cut of his double-breasted waistcoat with its sharp lapels and little gilt buttons. His socks were lavender blue, and his shoes were black and white, glistening like a wet heifer in the June sunlight.

His jacket was of the Italian cut, with cuffs to the sleeves and four buttons down the front. He

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wore a pink rosebud in his lapel and a four-in-hand tie of purple silk with a large gold stickpin to match his waistcoat buttons. His hat was purple to match his cravat and surrounded with a narrow white silk ribbon with a gold buckle. You might well have described him as dripping with splendour, and an ugly glisten of jealousy crept into Belphagor's eye at the sight of him.

"Now for a motorcar," said the Devil, rubbing his hands, and there, shining with chromium plate and glory, was a new American roadster of the most opulent appearance: white leather upholtery, salmon pink body work, radio aerials, fog lights, automatic transmission, power steering, 384 brake horse power, a cruising speed of ninety seven m.p.h., a built-in cocktail bar, a record player with stereophonic sound, and a collapsible rubber dinghy in the boot, not that the Devil cared about that.

In our villains got, with the Devil driving, up the boreen with them, round into the main road—main is it, God help it, nineteen-feet wide at the best, but yerrah, who'd pay the rates to widen it?—up the main road then, and coming to a whispering rest outside old Concepta's cottage. Out hops the Devil and knocks on the little rose-covered door. "Musha," says he when Rose Ann comes to the door, "glad I am to be the bearer of such good tidings to the like of you, Rose Ann McCarthy asthorre." For he was under the impression that this was how everyone in Ireland talked, no real Irishman having condescended to go below to him for some considerable time.

Rose Ann gapes at him, as well she might, what with his language, and his Dublin accent, and his grandeur, and the sight of Belphagor lifting his green velours hat and grimacing politely at her over the Devil's shoulder. "It *is* Miss Rose Ann that I have the honour and pleasure of addressing, isn't it?" said the Devil anxiously.

"Why yes, sir," trembles Rose, "but—"

"Say no more," says the Devil. "Am I right in thinking that you are a constant user of Sinko soap —" a question to which he already knew the answer, having flown through the kitchen that morning —"and have you by a lucky chance an open packet of that incomparable soap powder in your kitchen at this moment? For if you have—"

"Why yes," said Rose, a tiny flutter of cupidity disturbing the innocence of her mind. "As a matter of fact, I have." And on twinkling feet and dazzling ankles she flew to get it. Little and slight the start of the slope! So back she comes with her bright blue packet of Sinko Powder, and the Devil throws up his hands in delight. "Now for our question," he cried. "Tell me, what is the name of the capital city of England?"

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A faint shadow crossed the perfect surface of Rose Ann's forehead as she strained to think. "L–o–n–d–" whispered Belphagor, mouthing and eyeing her from behind his Master's back.

"Why—London!" cried Rose Ann as if she had immediately thought of it herself. Oh sorrow! Oh alas, alas, that second step, that steepening of the slippery path! Oh poor lost innocence!

"Brains as well as beauty," cried both the Devil and Belphagor, "what a happy combination!" And the Devil snapped his fingers. "Belphy, my dear chap, get Miss Rose Ann McCarthy her splendid Sinko Summer Dress with ruched pleats and pannier pockets and don't forget to slip that crisp new five pound note into one of them."

Back to the car sped Belphagor, where lying on the back seat in its transparent plastic-wardrobe-carrying-bag lay the beautiful dress, little embroidered flowers on the hem, and the crispest, most wearable blue and white linen bodice and skirt that a girl could desire. "Here, my dear!" cried the Devil, lifting his hat once more. "Well may you wear it, and if a stranger may make so bold, may you soon wear it in—" he dropped his musical voice an octave—"in agreeable company. At the dance tonight in the next parish, perhaps? A little of that five pounds expended on potable enjoyments for your aged great-grandmother would make her sleep so soundly that she would never note your absence, why not even if it was prolonged until midnight." But whether he said that aloud or merely whispered it into Rose Ann's receptive mind it would be beyond the wit of man to say.

Suffice it that tripping down later that morning to Shoneen James's Public House, Rose Ann bought her great-grandmother a medicine bottle full of watered whiskey and allowed it to transpire in passing that she had a new dress and that if anyone was of a mind to ask her she might even consider accompanying him to the dance in the next parish that same night.

And all this she said over the counter to Shoneen James in the full knowledge that, as she could see by the mirror behind and to one side of Shoneen James's head, Desmond Sorley Boy O'Shaughnessy was drowning his desires in the public bar next door to the Off-License department where she was transacting her business. Oh wirra, how far and fast the innocent can fall when once they lose their footing. Deception on deception. Oh alas. The Devil, again in the unsightly guise of a bluebottle sipping spilt beer on the counter, almost choked with satisfaction. "I'll have her," he spluttered, "I'll have her surely."

And round the corner he buzzed to fill the mind of Desmond Sorley Boy with unspeakable thoughts. And all the rest of that day till

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nightfall he and Belphagor left neither of those two unfortunates in peace or tranquillity, but first one and then the other had displayed to them the fruits of vice and the shameful joys of dalliance, until putting the two of them together on the same yard of road leading to the dance hall that night was like putting a magnet against a needle. They weren't two steps up the road but they were holding hands.

And they weren't ten steps further again but Desmond Sorley Boy was slyly and covetously slipping his arm round Rose Ann's waist, and finding the resistance to it no more than the merest formality. While at the same time his mind and mouth were filled with words of a passionate persuasiveness such as Rose Ann had never heard in her life and he himself was unaware that he was capable of framing. As no more he was, the poor thick, the Devil sitting on his shoulder all the while and whispering them into his ear one after the other, blarney upon blarney, enough to melt stone let alone the heart of a girl in a new summer dress with flowers on the hem and the change of a five pound note tucked safely in the Post Office Savings account.

And all the while wasn't Belphagor perched on her warm and delicately rounded shoulder in the shape and form of a money-spider, whispering to *her*? "What's an arm round the waist after what you see in the films and on the television," he was whispering—and then, as they came to the shady trees hanging over the road a quarter mile further on—"Suppose he was to try and kiss you?"—and the hot flushes and blushes nearly scalded his spidery foot as he trod on her bending neck. And Rose Ann near fainting with the persuasion she was receiving from two sides, and Desmond Sorley Boy near losing his footing on the stones of the road with unbridled passion—yerrah, damn is it any wonder that inside another ten steps he was kissing her like a starving man with a dish of pig's feet, and she—oh, how can a decent man write down the whole of it, she wasn't resisting him at all?

Everything she'd ever been told by her great-grandmother, and by her grandmother on her father's side (her grandmother on her mother's side being nothing much and dying at sixty three of an accident), and by her mother, and by her aunt the good nun Mother Mary of the Angels, and by Father O'Byrne in Confessions and Retreats, and by the good Bishop of Cork at her Confirmation, all, all of it might have been so much smoke on the wind for all it did for her, and they weren't half way to the dance—Holy Heaven, if it had been coming *back* from the dance it might have been another thing, but going *to* the dance, not even

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getting there—where in the world are girls coming to at all, I ask you? —they weren't half nor a quarter of the way to that unhappy occasion of sin, the Belcladder Parish Friday night dance with a late extension till two a.m. of a Saturday morning, when their feet inclined of their own accord it seemed down a little side turning, and from the side turning into a gateway, and from the gateway into a field full of the softest meadow grass and the most fragrant daisies and buttercups and cowslips, and from walking slower and slower, with their arms entwined and their lips meeting, didn't they—

But human pen refuses to continue. Let the Devil watch—as indeed he did—you and I can only avert our shocked eyes and withdraw into some more decent place. And having withdrawn, neither you nor I can know or say exactly what happened during the next hour or so in that misfortunate meadow, or why at the end of the time the pair of them came out looking shame-faced and down cast and brushing grass and cowslips off of their crumpled garments. But I fear the worst. And the Devil was sure of it.

"We have her," he cried to Belphagor, the pair of them resuming their disguise as salesmen, behind the wheel of their powerful car. "Not a second to lose." And throwing the car into one of its powerful gears, the Devil hurtled down the boreen at seventy miles an hour with the lights out, or at least out until the last second. The unhappy lovers stumbled into the little lane through the gateway to be suddenly blinded as the ferocious headlights pierced the dark. A scream, a shadow, the thump of a bumper against yielding humanity, and all was done. Leaving Belphagor to park the car, the Devil leapt out of his seat, and his human shape, grasped the fluttering soul of the just-murdered Rose Ann McCarthy, and crushing her in his cruel grip, flew off to where Rapesprocket still lay stretched and snoring beside the long-unused Devil's Hole.

"Let me go!" cried poor Rose Ann, or rather her poor tarnished but still beautiful soul. "Let me go! I am innocent!" But alas she lied, or the Devil Himself for all his dreadful powers could never have matched his noisome strength against her weak innocence. She lied indeed, and with a swift swing of his long arm the Devil pitched her like a baseball into the gaped and snoring mouth of Rapesprocket, waking him up in a choking paroxysm of coughing.

"Garrrh, Wugggh, Grummppff," Rapesprocket gargled, and poor Rose Ann all but disappeared down his black throat into his unspeakable interior. But he coughed her out onto the palm of his paw and stared at her as if he had never seen a condemned soul be-

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fore. Which as a matter of fact he hadn't, at least for several hundred years. "Whar? Who? Wharramarrer?" he said, breathing poteen fumes all over the poor trembling sinner.

"Throw her down the Hole," shouted the Devil impatiently.

"The Hole?" gaped Rapesprocket, staring round in alcoholic befuddlement. "Wha' Hole? Whug? Oh, the Hole?" And then, even more befuddled, "Who said tha'?"

The Devil began to dance with frustration. "Throw her down!" he screamed, for to achieve his full and ultimate purpose against Grunge it was not enough that Rose Ann, or any other sinner, should merely descend the chute into the waiting bin Below. She must be sent down by an officially accredited Resident Imp, holding his Residence and Parish by feudal enfeoffment from His Satanic Majesty, and now, by the progress of Democracy, unionised by Grunge. In other words, by an Imp who ought to be on strike, but wasn't. In short a whiteleg.

"Throw her down," mumbled Rapesprocket dizzily. "Ummm, ahh." He peered round him, lumbering unsteadily to his webbed feet, searching for the black and gaping Hole beside him. So unsteadily in fact that he nearly fell down it himself.

"Help!" cried Rose Ann to the surely not indifferent but still helpless sky. "Save me!"

Rapesprocket sniggered, belched, pawed her in a most indecent manner while folding her into a convenient shape for throwing, and prepared to fling her down the chute. The Devil smiled. Belphagor, who had joined him, clasped his dreadful claws in triumph. Up went Rapesprocket's unsteady arm. One white hand struggled between his gripping claws to appeal uselessly to the lost world of life and hope. "Down she goes," snarled the Devil.

"In with you," cried Rapesprocket, and hurled her into the entrance of the Pit. When out of the Pit came pouring imps and demons, trolls and greasy, unshaven fiends, carrying banners with clumsily written messages scrawled on them: DOWN WITH THE DEVIL-CLASS; DEATH TO THE FASCIST MONSTER SATAN; ANGELS GO HOME; TO HELL WITH SANCTITY; UNIVERSAL FRATERNITY OF IMPS AND SINNERS; SINNERS OF THE WORLD UNITE! YOU HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE BUT YOUR PAINS; and similarly subversive slogans.

One of the upsurging marchers saw Rose Ann's poor soul flying toward him in a downward curve, swung his banner with a practised ease that told of far too many hours wasted playing baseball behind the furnaces when he ought to have been tormenting sinners in front of them, and batted her straight back

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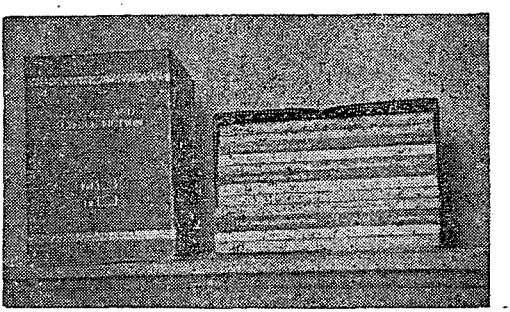
over Rapesprocket's head, over the Devil's head, over Belphagor's head, and although that was no part of his impish intention, right back into the boreen where a minute or so before she had been knocked senseless and apparently lifeless by the Devil's motorcar.

She opened her eyes to find Desmond Sorley Boy bending over her and murmuring the most extraordinary promises of future virtue and abstention from alcohol and other matters if only she would open them, and it is amazing proof of the resilient qualities of the human frame, and particularly of the young female human frame, that apart from extensive bruising in an indelicate (but given the full circumstances, perhaps an appropriate) place, and a resultant lameness that confined her to her bed for a penitential month, she suffered no lasting ill effects from the night's adventures. Unless her eventual and in fact somewhat hastily arranged marriage with Sorley Boy could be considered an ill-effect. She certainly seemed quite reasonably contented the last time I saw her.

As for the Devil and Belphagor, I am really not at liberty to say what has happened to them, these matters being *sub judice* and even *sub rosa* and *sub sigillum*. But I would advise you that if two extremely well-dressed men should come to your door asking if you by any chance have a packet of Sinko soap in your kitchen, you should close the door sharply in their ingratiating faces and have nothing whatsoever to do with them. Nothing.



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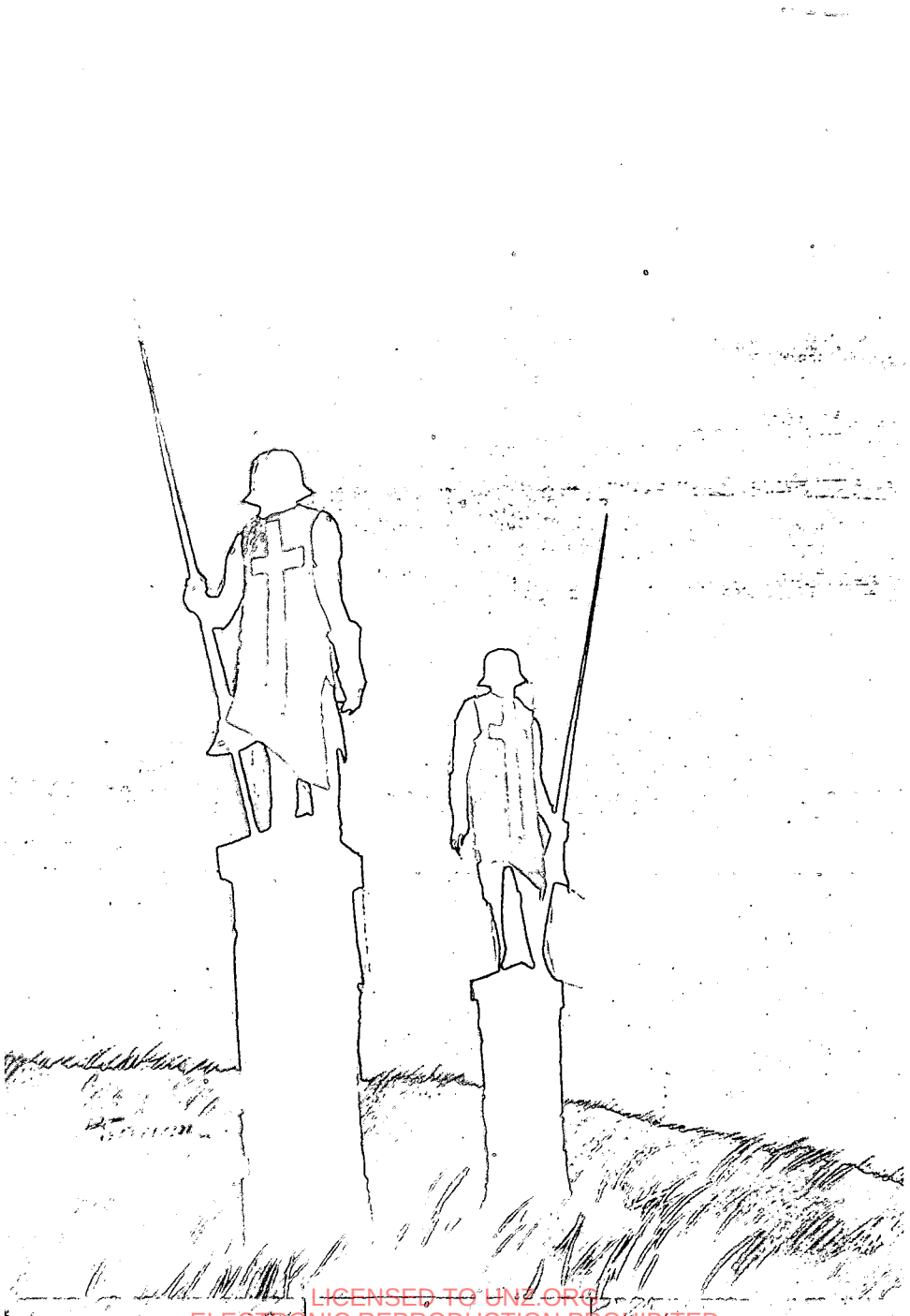

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